



## A Primer on the Trinity: Keeping our Theology Christian

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Dear Stephen, David, Emily And Beth,<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the Spring term I have been involved in reading and thinking off and on about an article which I have been asked to write. We now publish a new journal here on the campus. It is intended for pastors and others who are engaged in Christian ministry, and it is trying—among other things—to bridge the gap between the academic study of theology and the day-to-day realities of Christian existence in those places where people gather to worship in the name of Jesus.

The editor has asked me to write a piece tentatively called, “On Keeping our Theology Trinitarian.” Now, of all the things I have ever thought about very much, the Trinity is *not* one of them. And in looking over the work of other “systematic theologians” (the label I also wear on the job), it seems that I am not alone.<sup>2</sup> We theologians seem to keep a respectful distance from the Trinity, tipping our hats to the historians who patiently trace out the complexity of the doctrine’s development over the centuries as Christians tried to defend what is somehow implied in the Scriptures’ climactic story of Jesus.

So, you ask, why am I writing *you* about it, rather than getting on with the piece already several weeks past deadline? For two reasons. First of all, I have been looking for an intelligent, educated audience whom I know very well, and to whom I could try to communicate what nearly defies clear expression, and in language as nontechnical as possible. I know you to be intelligent because you have a gifted mother, and I know you are well educated because I have helped pay for your expensive college degrees. But that is not sufficient reason to inflict

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<sup>1</sup>Theology in the form of an epistle needs no apology, but it is especially appropriate when dealing with the Trinity as a social reality. God as triune does reveal himself but, like a letter-writer, in ways which are intended to enable a response, and thus God enters into the situation of the receiver, knowing the receiver intimately. An article about the Trinity ought, I think, exhibit in style what it describes in substance.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Barth is the outstanding exception, and more recently Jürgen Moltmann who begins his series of “systematic contributions” with a volume entitled, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

on you the role of being a test audience. Indeed the second reason I am writing in this form is that—and I should have guessed this to be the case—one cannot (I have discovered) read and think about the Trinity without coming to terms with oneself. As it turns out, this is more than a writing project; this is an exercise in self-discovery, an exploration of what is ultimately important, an inquiry into what one can really believe, trust, and hope for. The Trinity, as I have come to realize, is something of a disclosure about us—about you and me—because it clarifies,

defines, and finally reveals the deepest nature of human relationships.<sup>3</sup>

## I. RELATEDNESS

The time is ripe in my life to make this little report to the four of you. In our letters and conversations we have touched upon our family and its interrelationships many times. When relationships change, each member of the relationship changes too, right? As each of you has changed, the family has been altered. So Stephen, there in Africa, you are being profoundly changed spiritually by your life as the lone white person in an equatorial village, and your narrative letters have entered deeply into my consciousness. And David, just home from three years in Japan, bi-lingual and bi-cultural now, and never again to be a naive American; because of you my awareness has been riveted on the Orient like never before. Emily, you will recall my last visit with you in your beloved Boston and our talks about the world of computers in which you live. I have thought much about our discussion of envisioning possible worlds and how technology expands the powers of human imagination. And college math senior, Beth, if ever there is one who embodies for me the miracle of growth from little girl to the new role of women with all its perils and promise, it is you.

Excuse my capsule summaries of the galaxies of experience<sup>4</sup> which all of you personify, but I did want to pin-point this fact: your father has not been a remote observer of the course of your life's journeys so far, nor have I been merely the beneficiary of a return on my investment in you, adorning myself with you as some external possessions. No, the point about relatedness is that it is internal, not external; intimate, not remote; cumulative, not fixed. We have lived *in* each other without obliterating the pain and risk of each other's living. Internal relatedness, as we have experienced, means that your lives have entered into and changed your father's life, and yet he is still—changed though he be—your father.

If you agree with me so far about the essential character of relatedness—that is, if it is a notion that strikes you as (1) corresponding to the facts of our experience together, and (2) as coherent to your mind somehow (that is, it is at least not

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<sup>3</sup>Relation, says Karl Rahner, cannot be adequately defined independently of Trinity. Cf. his book, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 69. Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) quotes Barth, "Indeed the peak of all happening in revelation, according to Holy Scripture, consists in the fact that God speaks as an I, and is heard by the Thou who is spoken to" (p. 66).

<sup>4</sup>For theological purposes, the word "experience" has been nearly ruined by popular usage. Here and elsewhere I intend the word as in Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1979) and the companion volume *Christ* (New York: Seabury, 1980). For a summary discussion, see my review, *Word & World* 1 (1981) 189-194, as well as Schillebeeckx's own *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

contradictory to say that you have deeply influenced your father as father without eliminating his identity as father)—well, then, you are on the way to understanding why I think the doctrine of the Trinity is not only a kind of disclosure and definition of our relationship but is a fundamental clue to why being a Christian is knowing and trusting the truth as revealed in Jesus and expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. And you also can perhaps see why I cannot just write about the Trinity without also writing about, and to, and for, you and me.

The editor will perhaps notice that I have rejected the proposed title, "On Keeping our Theology Trinitarian." I prefer "How the Trinity Keeps our Thinking (Theology) and our Living

(Ethics) Christian.” You see, over the years since your baptism, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” I have really cared that you be Christian in your thinking and living, and I have tried to nudge you in that way. It is not so much that I want you to perpetuate the religion of your father (like perpetuating some favorite brand of cereal we have always had in the house ), but rather because it is a question of truth. I believe the Christian proposal to be the truth. Not only because of a correspondence to the deepest dimensions of our experience, and not only because it is coherent to the deepest longings of our minds, but also because what we behold in the Christian message is trustworthy, it merits our commitment, and we can entrust our lives to this venture. Thus, as you will notice, I have named three of the major tests for claiming that the Christian proposal is the way of truth: correspondence to experience (that’s how I began: an appeal to the experience of relatedness), coherence to the mind (no fundamental contradictions like “p equals non-p”), and finally trustworthiness (worshipful, worthy of loyalty, deserving of complete reliance or commitment). Correspondence, coherence, commitment—all three criteria, I think—are necessary to argue for the truth of the Christian venture. No single one is sufficient if we are to make the case for Christian faith as truthful, true and trustworthy.<sup>5</sup>

## II. JESUS

Already you may object, “Dad, why do you bother with abstractions and obscure doctrines? Why not just speak simply, even more simply than you already have, and not confuse people with the language inherited from along, and for the majority of folks, unknown history? What good does it do to insist on the Trinity? Why not just describe the story of Jesus and the wonderful effect he has had on the lives of people?”

I’m sure you are not objecting to the use of abstractions as such. We could simply never communicate with each other without abstractions like “family,” “life,” “politics,” and “justice.” Even when we do not agree concerning the most acceptable definitions of the terms, we would not argue for the elimination of abstractions. But many today would agree with you that the meanings which have clustered around the traditional doctrines of Christianity are either utterly meaningless or so difficult to “relate to” that they seem useless. The Trinity is a prime example. So why not drop it and just tell the story of Jesus?

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<sup>5</sup>While this primer is a brief doctrinal exploration, the necessary role for “fundamental theology” is indicated in this paragraph. See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: seabury, 1975), especially chapter four.

Glad you asked. My answer has to do with the Bible. The original and most reliable source for any story centering on Jesus is the Bible. One thing seems absolutely clear about the New Testament. Those who wrote the various books were convinced that Jesus was the human embodiment of God’s good news to and among humanity.<sup>6</sup> It is a plain historical fact that some people experienced Jesus as the in-the-flesh instance or evidence that God wills human beings to be liberated from the fear of death, to be set free from anxiety about their sin (however they may have defined sin), and that God wills all people to put their trust in the grace and mercy of God rather than to live in fear of princes or power of any earthly sort. We modern people may not choose, or may not be able, to believe that Jesus was, as a matter of fact, the good news come from God, but there is no denying that the New Testament writers experienced Jesus as such.

Now, because a sufficient number of people did so greet him and trust in him, Jesus came to the public attention of political and religious leaders and roused their anxiety. He was put to death as a possible threat to their authority. It is highly doubtful that Jesus would have been executed as the messiah come from God if he had been utterly ignored, or if he had never gone “public.” Ironically, then, the faith which Jesus induced others to have in him as God’s good news of liberation set in motion some dangerous opposition leading to his ugly death on the cross by a variety of forces largely ignorant of the truth of his mission.

So, obviously, we cannot just “tell the story” of Jesus without mentioning God and how Jesus was experienced as God’s good news. Why was Jesus executed? Because people believed in him as the good news from God. Why did they, how could they, believe that? Obviously something about Jesus induced them to believe. *Was* Jesus good news from God? If so, not in exactly the sense that his followers supposed. But if he was, what a rotten thing to do to God! And (here is the bottom line question) if Jesus was God’s own expression of God’s will, what does that say about God? What kind of God could be threatened by death?

I think you can see why, given the original telling of the Jesus story in the New Testament, it just won’t do to reduce the story to a one-dimensional narrative about a young Jew named Jesus. If people had not believed in him as God’s good news, he would not have been publicly executed. But they did—and he was. If those original believers had not publicly followed him, or if Jesus had taken steps to prevent anyone from following him, we would not have any story to tell at all. But what is fixed in history, like some jagged bone stuck in the throat of humanity (and Christians have this annoying practice of keeping the whole episode alive in the memory of the human race), is that he was hideously executed *because* of what he set in motion by his life and words. So we have to either swallow it or spit it out, trust or disbelieve. (Originally one official response was to try to stamp out the story by killing the Christians.)

### III. EXPERIENCE AND CREEDS

Stephen, you are the best story-teller among us, our writer. You especially can appreciate how complex and tricky it would be to tell the story of Jesus without making Jesus into some kind of superman or spook who only masquerades as a

<sup>6</sup>My debt to Schillebeeckx’s methods and conclusions is obvious here.

flesh-and-bone human. One cannot merely tell the story of Jesus as *true* without also speaking about that story as God’s story; yet God’s story is here to be told as a fully *human* story. His dying would especially be difficult. The temptation is to stage it, theatrically, so it only looks like death. We find it impossible to tell the story of God as a fully human story without fudging, especially fudging when the story implies that God suffers death.

Over the centuries theologians have concocted all kinds of ways of avoiding the full impact of the death of Jesus as the suffering death of God. A suffering and dying God would be no God worthy of the name.<sup>7</sup> And so the story of Jesus is often made to sound like a carnival show, his death a magic trick done with mirrors.

If the life and the death of Jesus are the story of God, then we have to start wondering about how to *think* of God and *speak* of God (we call such thinking and speaking theology) so that our thinking and speaking will be appropriate to what we say about Jesus whose life and

death are the story of God. Assuming, of course, that when Jesus induced people to trust him as God's own liberation from their fears and bondages, they were justified in trusting Jesus because Jesus was, in the very fact of his own flesh and blood, the very One they trusted him to be. And having assumed just that, we are face to face with the question already posed: how do we speak of God in the flesh of a dying rabbi named Jesus?

So we come back to my opening comments about relatedness, and the nature or structure of relatedness as mutual influence, or as an internal rather than an external connection. The story of Jesus raises the question of relatedness to the absolutely ultimate level: How are God and Jesus related so that the story of Jesus is truly the story of God? That question was there right from the beginning, but it took centuries before it could be clarified. Even so, all the elements of the much later clarification (in terms of doctrine) were already present. What Christians *experienced* as God present in Jesus was vivid, immediate, and certain for them, but it was centuries before it could be expressed. I like to say that the early church knew from experience more than it could say clearly in doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Wouldn't the four of you testify to something like that about your experience in the family? What all of you in recent years have verbally expressed about the shared love in the family is something you have for many years experienced but only later could draw out or press out (express) into words. The expressions refer to prior experience, to present reality, and to future hopes for the relationship. It is only when the *expressions* of love are offered as cheap substitutes for the hard reality of love that they are false or phony.

Wouldn't you agree, though, that just as—on the one hand—an expression can be phony if it is a substitute for the reality of love, so also—on the other hand—an expression or declaration of love can nurture and protect and reaffirm that reality? Do you remember how calling home for a pep talk was important during the tough times at school? The language of love does not replace the real-

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<sup>7</sup>Jürgen Moltmann especially has analyzed the problem in *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), chapter two.

<sup>8</sup>See Bernard Lonergan's distinction between the two kinds of development, namely, the development of the dogma itself (from one kind of clarity to another kind of clarity) and the development of the idea of dogma (from obscurity to clarity) in *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 13ff.

ity of love, but it can clarify, reinforce, protect, and nurture that which has been experienced as love and which underlies all our expressions of love.<sup>9</sup> So it is with doctrine. It can often be abused as though it were a substitute for faith-as-experienced, but it can also clarify, reinforce, and protect as well as nurture what is the underlying foundation of doctrine.

#### IV. THREEFOLDNESS

Behind and under and back of the doctrine of the Trinity is the root-experience of people encountering in Jesus, as the suffering man of sorrows, what was also the reality of God's way of being and living in the world.<sup>10</sup> How do we express that relatedness (the living God in the living of Jesus) which is at the base of the Christian experience without being false on the one hand while, on the other, actually nurturing and clarifying and protecting that relatedness of God and

Jesus, a relatedness on which our very lives depend for freedom and hope? As we all know, there is never really a perfectly adequate expression for what are the deeply important dimensions and realities of experience, but we do strive to express urgent truth somehow. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a perfectly clear expression, but it does a fairly adequate job of keeping our faith and our lives Christian. In the final part of this correspondence, I want to explain how it does that; as for the history of the doctrine's development, you can read such accounts elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

I fear I have already demolished any interest that may have been stirred up in you at the start, but I need to risk making additional comments before going on to the major task of showing how this doctrine keeps our thinking and our living Christian.

The Trinity, as you well know, is a three-foldness, a unity with three aspects which are all integral to the unity, but which do not fragment into three isolated entities. You could well ask, why three-foldness? If the Christian experience is rooted in the relatedness of God and Jesus, why does it require a notion of Trinity to clarify and protect the God/Jesus relationship?<sup>12</sup> One way to answer that, based on the early experience of Jesus as God's good news, is to say that the same God who is revealed in Jesus is the God who, by virtue of being God, is just who God always was and is and will be—from the beginning, so to speak. Sometimes we theologians would say that first there is God as God or as the Word, and there also is the Word of God in the flesh (the same Word of course, but distinctly enfleshed in the historical Jesus) and that this “incarnation” of the Word is the unique instance of God's distinctive way of being and living in the whole of crea-

<sup>9</sup>See R. P. C. Hanson's chapter on “Dogma” in *The Attractiveness of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1973) and Alan Richardson, *Creeeds in the Making* (London: SCM, 1935), who writes, “Christian doctrine always arises from Christian experience” (p. 99).

<sup>10</sup>“Triune God’ and ‘Trinity’ are legitimate but secondary concepts which, after the events, synthesize the concrete experience of salvation and revelation in a ‘short formula,’” K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 59. Rahner's position is that in the order of knowing, the Trinity is “economic,” and in the order of being, it is “immanent” or “essential.” See pp. 64, 74, 82.

<sup>11</sup>For example, William G. Rusch, editor and translator, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 1-27.

<sup>12</sup>C. C. Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), perhaps the best-known argument for the adequacy of two-foldness.

tion. God seeks a relationship of love with the whole created order; God seeks a *relationship*, and God enables that relationship to happen by breathing into all creatures the Spirit who is God responding to God within each creature. So there is (1) God, who is also the (2) God who acts or reveals, as well as the (3) God who as Spirit enlivens all creatures in responding to their Creator. Thus one God in threefoldness.<sup>13</sup>

Now all of that is *implied* but not directly known through and in the experience of Christians who, in Jesus, encounter the good news that God wants us to live freely in God.

Is this not a sensible development of thought? When we speak of the one God whom we meet in Jesus Christ, we cannot just say one thing only. If we are to speak truthfully of God, we have to speak of God (1) who is hidden behind all creation as its source and goal, (2) who reveals the divine will in such a way as to remove all barriers to a relationship with God, and (3) who enables those whom God wills to have in love to respond *to* God through God's gift of himself as

indwelling Spirit.

Remember, we speak here of one God, one divine agent or Actor who acts or speaks through three distinct masks. (The Latin word for mask is *persona*, and so the familiar but misleading idea of “God in three persons” got its start with that term.)<sup>14</sup> As God relates to us, these three masks can be distinguished but cannot be totally disassociated from one another, because it is the one Actor who speaks or sounds through (per-son) these masks (*persons*) appropriate to the Actor’s one sovereign will.<sup>15</sup> These so-called external works are not divisible, that is, it is not possible for you or me to have God only as revealer, let’s say, but not as creator, because it is the one and only Actor who speaks through the masks.

## V. SUFFICIENCY

David, I remember last year sitting with you in a hot Japanese bath outside Minamata trying to answer your young Buddhist friend’s question about why I am a Christian. You were translating into Japanese what I thought was my clear and simple testimony to Jesus. Later you told me that it was too complicated for the Buddhist to understand. Aren’t you glad he did not ask me about the Trinity? And yet, everything I said to the young Buddhist about Jesus implies all I have here tried to summarize about the Trinity—and more. The Trinity makes explicit (or expresses) nothing that is not implicit (not directly expressed but present even so) in the life and death of Jesus as the life and death of God.

Speaking of that Buddhist and of Jesus, I remember a familiar statement by my favorite twentieth century philosopher. “The Buddha gave his doctrine to enlighten the world; Christ gave his life. It is for Christians to discern the doctrine.”<sup>16</sup> And that rather well summarizes my point up to now. If God is in Christ, what must God be? If Jesus’ life is the central clue to God, how do we express

<sup>13</sup>Even acceptance of God’s offer of relationship is one more moment of the self-communication of God. See K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 95.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 103ff.

<sup>15</sup>The external works of the Trinity are indivisible (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*).

<sup>16</sup>A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Meridian, 1960) 55.

God’s nature in an adequate way? As Christians have attempted to think about *God* in the light of their experience of God in Jesus Christ, they have found that none of the available concepts defining God and humanity have been sufficient to express, protect, and nurture what had been deep in the humanity of Jesus’ life. And so, the mind-twisting notion of the Trinity is the uniquely Christian way of expressing abstractly what is implied by the concrete story of Jesus. Nothing less is sufficient to keep our thinking and our living Christian. Any *other* expression of the reality of God may be understandable and less complex, and perhaps even more agreeable or attractive to our wishes, but it would not be appropriate to the original experience of the life and death of Jesus as witnessed to in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

## VI. USEFULNESS

Finally, how *does* this doctrine, which Christians have “discerned” from the life and death of Jesus, keep our thinking and our living Christian? How does the Trinity safeguard our

theology and way of life from betraying what is implied by the story of Jesus? After all, that is ultimately what I care about, that we (you and I) will not stray from the truth as true, truthful, and trustworthy.

I can only mention some of the ways the Trinity safeguards and keeps and nurtures the truth implied by the life and death of Jesus, risking as I do oversimplification—and some embarrassment with additional personal references.

1. *God and power.* If we really follow through and think about what is implied in believing that the story of Jesus is the story of God, then the Christian faith demands some radical revolutions or changes in our understanding of God. We humans too often worship power, and we too often think that God ought to be what *we* would like to be if we were God. We ascribe to God attributes of a power-obsessed figure, zapping and controlling and manipulating and absolutely dominating all other lesser powers. We are fascinated by the notion of God in terms of God-Almightiness.<sup>18</sup> But if Jesus is the norm or standard for speaking of how God lives in the world, or if Jesus is somehow the lens for getting our thoughts rightly focussed on God, we have to change our ideas totally.

All the inherited ideas about God—from Greek philosophy, from religious tradition, or whatever—are just not adequate for expressing the New Testament view of God in the life of Jesus. The Trinity offers a new view of God’s love and presence in the world in terms of the spirit of Christ, liberating, recreating, and reconciling. This is no absentee divine Wizard of Oz whose power is exercised at a distance by remote control. God’s power and presence are intimate, not remote, inward, not external. Again, the logic of relatedness is the key to understanding the revolutionary notion of God as Trinity, and thus the Trinity keeps our thinking and living under the norms of Jesus’ story as God’s story.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Ultimately much of the intellectual resistance to trinitarian thought is based on a pagan or Arian concept of God as utterly unknowable, impassible, unchangeable, and unreachable. See A. Richardson, *Creeds*, 52.

<sup>18</sup>Daniel Migliore, *Called to Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 63.

<sup>19</sup>See Jan Milic Lochman, “The Trinity and Human Life,” *Theology* 78 (1975) 173-183, for a discussion of the social character of the God of Scripture.

2. *Human freedom.* Your parents have been thinking about a reunion when all of us can again be in the same place long enough. We would like each of us to tell our favorite stories about each other, our best memories of our lives so far. In many cases, I am sure, they will be stories of the search for freedom: painful, wonderful, inevitable. These will be stories of discovering that freedom is *not* the mere absence of limit or restraint. Freedom is not the absolute power to eliminate all obstacles. All our childish fantasies (“What would you do if you had all the money in the world?”), if we were ever granted them, would plunge us into total isolation, into loneliness and despair, and we would scarcely be human any longer. And yet, like the worship of power, the view of freedom as complete, unrestrained license has always been, and still is, widespread. But the story of Jesus implies that the only freedom that is both worthy of our desire and appropriate for finite human beings is the freedom to belong, to be with others, and to find ourselves as cherished members of the family. Ultimately that means the human family under God—and in God. So we are the worst enemies of freedom when we think we must have freedom as unlimited control over our individual lives.



Again, all such inherited views of freedom which extol unlimited individualism are just not appropriate for expressing the freedom implied by the Christian experience of God in the life of Jesus. To repeat, the Trinity expresses what is implicit in Jesus, namely, that perfect freedom is not one person perfectly alone. Perfect freedom is found only in perfect relatedness, in the relationship of love. In the community of life in Christ each person is liberated from any bondage of mind or spirit. No one is regarded as master, no one as slave. To live in love is not to own or possess another person, because both the lover and the beloved are free. At the same time, in the community of "life in Christ" every person feels bound (!) to serve freely (!) those whom he or she loves. Freedom is not individualism, nor an excuse from responsibility. Individualistic notions of freedom require that anyone who is rugged or ruthless or lucky enough to achieve individual freedom must have enough power to control others, so that when freedom is defined in such a manner it always means slavery or bondage for others. Thus, one of the ways the Trinity keeps our thinking (about freedom) and our living (as free persons) in harmony with the Christian experience of the reality of God in Jesus is that this doctrine holds up to us a social view of freedom, not an individualistic view. To be truly free is to be truly bound by the bonds of love. Love puts limits on freedom in order to grant genuine freedom. Freedom is found in relatedness.<sup>20</sup>

3. *Hope*. Now that all of you offspring have flown out of the nest and live in and around the world, one of the favorite topics of conversation between your parents is about your various adventures and what they might mean for your future(s). We have great hopes for you even though your futures are unknown, and I believe, really indeterminate, contingent on a great range of variables which include your own decisions. Thinking about your futures and our hopes for them is a sample of what it means to formulate an adequate concept of hope.

What I mean, and what lends itself so well to illustrations from our family life, is this: for each of us, the future is really quite open and therefore scary, a

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<sup>20</sup>See chapter five of Norman Pittenger, *The Divine Triunity* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1977), for an exposition of the Trinity as an inclusive reality which can allow for partial truths in atheism, deism, and humanism.

cause for genuine anxiety. The past is settled, but the future is open and indeterminate. All sorts of nightmarish things can go terrifyingly wrong in the lives of any of us, and when I multiply our little number until it reaches the world's population, the possibilities become literally unthinkable even though, as possibilities, they are frighteningly real. Statistical probabilities can be projected for any person, but no hard predictions can be made for any of them. Emily and Beth, as mathematicians you know that fact better than I. So, given the contingencies, how can I hope? What can be the basis of hope if so little can be predicted with certainty?

We are frequently invited by various gurus, advertised seers, self-styled prophets, radio preachers, and social analysts to believe that their predictions and warnings are fool-proof. (Those who send chain-letters threatening and promising extravagant things if we do or do not break the chain are of the same sort.) People pay large sums for newsletters which predict trends in the stock market. The idea that the future is genuinely open in large and important ways is so unnerving that we are all susceptible to those who advertise themselves as predictors and forecasters. We want something to hang our hopes on, some inside dope about what the future

will certainly be like.

Just as freedom is found in relatedness, as I've already asserted, so we have to learn to think about hope in terms of relatedness. If each of us confines our thinking about hope to our own single futures, then the future will be so utterly fraught with risk—with everyone planning and doing their own thing alone—that there is nothing to be said about any single future that can give us hope. We have no certain basis for hope when we think about the future individualistically. None. Will there be happiness for *me* in five years? If that is the question, no one can offer me hope. Who will I be in ten years? Again, if that is the question, no basis for hope. However, if we think about hope in terms of relatedness, then we can face the future hopefully. Who I will be, what the circumstances of my life will be, are uncertain. *Whose* I will be can surely be promised through a commitment. I cannot pin much hope on predictions, but I can commit myself to promises. And that is the great theme of hope offered in the New Testament. The future is uncertain because of death and powers and principalities, but what is certain is the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The Trinity is the church's way of saying that God is so intimately, inwardly, and steadfastly bound up with the whole of reality,<sup>21</sup> both past and future, that nothing can separate us from God. It is that relatedness which is certain, for all eternity, and that is the basis for our hope.

4. *Suffering*. One of the false attractions of individualistic notions of freedom and of hope is the baseless promise that somehow we can avoid pain and suffering. The absolutely ultimate drug, I suppose, would put us into a state of feeling perpetually free and euphoric and immune to physical or psychic pain. Perhaps the major attraction of drugs and alcohol is just that: escape from the pain of social existence into an undisturbed citadel of private bliss. Sometimes religion has

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<sup>21</sup>See Schubert Ogden, "On the Trinity," *Theology* 83 (1980) 97-102, where he argues that the neo-classical theism of process metaphysics can give a more appropriate account of the distinctively Christian revelation of "God as essentially triune and hence of an 'immanent' as well as an 'economic' Trinity."

functioned that way too: escapism, otherworldliness, avoidance of the fallenness of existence, denial of pain and death, or the guarantee of "success."

But when the story of Jesus is the focus and definition of God's way of being and living in the world, and when the Trinity does indeed express that Jesus-centered disclosure of God's nature, then—to put it bluntly—God does *not* will *first of all* the avoidance of pain and suffering. God does not will to rescue us from the world. Salvation is not the Great Escape. It should also be obvious that God does not *intend* suffering and pain either; the point is that the avoidance of suffering is not the top item on the divine agenda if we take the life of Jesus to be the disclosure of God's way of being and living in the world. What God does will is to relate as *God*, and not as a metaphysical entity derived from speculative thought in the pursuit of satisfying human wishfulness. God wills, first of all, to relate as God, the committed Lover, and—since Jesus is our clue to what that means concretely—God's will to be the Lover makes God vulnerable to rejection, to scorn, to suffering. Suffering is not what God wills; suffering is what God accepts as the consequence of the divine will to be the committed Lover. God is "pure unbounded Love"; nothing can limit the will of God to be the Lover, but since that is who God has decided to *be*, it also means that God will *become* more and more vulnerable, without limit.<sup>22</sup> Even death cannot

fully define or put limits on the extent to which God is willing to suffer rather than to let human rejection taunt God into breaking or betraying the promise to be the Lover. God's commitment to be who God is, the Lover, means that God becomes the sufferer without limit. Even death cannot defeat God's will to be the Lover. Even when God must suffer the death of the Son, God's will to love does not crack. Here is assurance that we can never break God's resolve to have us in love.

The Trinity keeps our thinking and living Christian in that it protects the reality of salvation from being escape from suffering, and instead keeps our notions of salvation centered on the life and suffering of Jesus as the disclosure of the divine will to love. Salvation is not from, but through, suffering, because ultimately what God wills is to relate to us as the Lover regardless of what God's "Being" as Lover might require God to *become* through the whole history of God being our Companion in suffering.<sup>23</sup>

5. *Grace*. Earlier I had wondered whether you might be complaining that any traditional talk about the Trinity was insignificant compared to the greater importance of telling the story of Jesus. By now you may be wondering whether I had not made too much of Jesus as the center of God's way in the world. I may now strike you as being too exclusivistic, too anxious to defend Christianity as the one and only way, too arrogant in my views relative to all the other faiths and beliefs in the world.

You won't be surprised, though, if now I say that the Trinity keeps us Christians from being too exclusivistic, too defensive, or too arrogant. To make this last modest claim for the Trinity, I will use the familiar figure of the circle and its center. A circle has a center or focus as well as a circumference or scope. The center is not the circumference, and the focus is not the scope. For me to claim, as I do, that

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<sup>22</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, "The Trinitarian History of God," *Theology* 78 (1975) 645.

<sup>23</sup>E. Jünger, *Trinity*, 89ff. Cf. also Lewis Ford, *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 99-111.

Jesus is the center or the focus of God's grace and love does not imply that Jesus defines the circumference or the scope. God's grace is centered or focussed in the suffering and death of Jesus, and as center the life and death of Jesus make God's grace accessible, believable, and concrete. But the center does not limit or define the circumference. God's love and grace are intensely and unsurpassably focussed in Jesus Christ. Christ is our assurance of that grace, but the grace is unlimited, shed on the whole scope of God's creation.<sup>24</sup> Apart from Christ the grace of God may be ambiguous, hidden, out of focus, or simply unbelievable in this world of suffering and of one-dimensional scientific knowledge. But in Jesus, the suffering man of sorrows, the grace of God is clarified, intensified, and believable.

The doctrine of the Trinity functions to prevent us from being exclusivistic in our testifying to Jesus as the focus of the grace of God. If our imaginations and our minds are guided by this doctrine, we should be able to avoid narrow, exclusivistic testimonies to Jesus as the Christ of God, and be prepared to notice that God's grace does also manifest itself in the works of nature, in the religious strivings of people, in the creativity of artists, poets, musicians, and writers, in the efforts of honest people to achieve justice,<sup>25</sup> and in what you, Stephen, have called that "human connection" which has welcomed you among the Bateke people, a "connection" that transcends deep cultural differences. I believe that that "connection" is a gift of God's grace. Anything, according to the Trinity, anything in this whole created order can be the bearer of

grace. Christians thank God that grace is universally present even when muted, obscure, and out of focus, and most of all thank God that God's grace has been made clear and believable and unsurpassable in the very human life of Jesus.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) and especially his essay, "The Presence and Acts of the Triune God in Creation and History," *The Gospel and Human Destiny*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 90-135. I am tempted to quote Sittler's soaring prose at length, but this passage from the latter title (on p. 132) will have to suffice:

[W]e dare not exclude as a theatre of grace that same order of creation within whose form and substance God willed in Christ to make the place of his gracious presence. A Christian theology cannot go from nature to grace; the incarnation demands that it so relate grace to nature that the presence of God as grace in nature is not in principle excluded.

There is, that is to say, no Christology or grace in the sheer, mute phenomenology of nature as such. But when grace as a redemptive reality, originating in the determinate will of the Father, is beheld as the meaning of the Son, the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are indeed, children of God; and the reality of grace known *there* names the Son as the life-principle and mystery of meaning in all that is.

<sup>25</sup>As, for example, M. Douglas Meeks, "Toward a Trinitarian View of Economics," *Christianity and Crisis* 40 (1980) 307-316.