

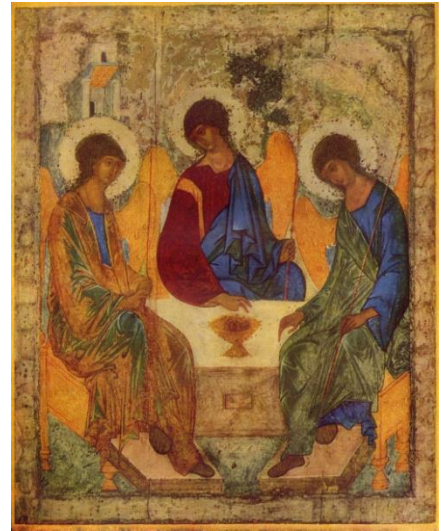
TRULY TRINITARIAN WORSHIP

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“Nil nisi te, Domine. Nil nisi te.” (“Nothing but you, Lord. Nothing but you.”)
–St. Thomas Aquinas

The late theologian and ethicist Stanley Grenz was a good friend of IWS. While his wife Edna worked on her doctorate at IWS, which she received in 2005, he would hang out on campus with us, eating meals, coming to chapel, sitting in classes. He was our first alumni seminar speaker. At Bob Webber’s invitation he gave the presidential address in 2003. In that memorable address he exclaimed, “Christian worship must be self-consciously Trinitarian and Christological.” Sounds right, doesn’t it? But what does it mean? I think perhaps Stan meant this: true Christian worship celebrates above all the Paschal mystery—the passion, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ—and in that celebration participates in the divine life of the Trinity. Being self-consciously Trinitarian embraces and even necessitates being self-consciously Christological. Let’s explore this a bit.



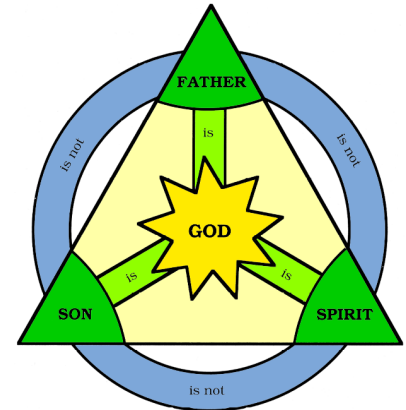
Andrei Rubilev, Holy Trinity Icon

Trinity Sunday is sometimes known as the preacher’s nightmare. I was asked for the first time to preach in my home church on the preacher’s nightmare Sunday! What can you say about the Trinity? It’s a great mystery, right? I actually love Trinity Sunday, because it gives us the opportunity to contemplate the question, “Who is God?” The Trinity can be confusing; but it’s not just a theological Rubik’s Cube to be solved, rather it is THE summary statement of what we believe about who God is.

Who is God? Theologian Stanley Hauerwas famously stated, “When someone says to you ‘God Bless you,’ the proper response should be, ‘Which God do you mean?’” We have a distinctive definition of God. Christians don’t just believe in a God who is a distant monad, but rather a God who is a Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is THE distinctively Christian doctrine, but it is also the basic doctrinal truth that is, sadly, commonly missing from worship. Our belief in God separates us from secularists, Buddhists or atheists; our belief in a personal God separates us from New Age mystics and Hindus; and our belief in the

Trinity separates us from Unitarians, Jews and Muslims. It's THE great defining doctrine of Christianity, proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus claimed to be sent by God (like many others, like the prophets, priests, kings and patriarchs of the Old Testament), but he alone claimed to be one with God, and therefore God himself. He was other than the Father, but on the same divine level as the Father.

Then, at the last supper, he spoke of an advocate, a *Paraclete*, whom he and the Father would send. This gift, too, was God. So there is the Father, the sending one, the Son, the one sent, and the Holy Spirit, spirated and sent by both the Father and the Son.



Ancient Trinity
<http://www.answerjds.org/images/AncientTrinity.gif>

The Trinitarian nature of God is most definitively described in an ancient Christian document, commonly called the Athanasian Creed, dating probably from around the late 5th or early 6th centuries. Here is a section:

We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.
Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all One, the Glory Equal, the Majesty Co-Eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father Uncreate, the Son Uncreate, and the Holy Ghost Uncreate. The Father Incomprehensible, the Son Incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost Incomprehensible. The Father Eternal, the Son Eternal, and the Holy Ghost Eternal and yet they are not Three Eternals but One Eternal. As also there are not Three Uncreated, nor Three Incomprehensibles, but One Uncreated, and One Incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not Three Almighties but One Almighty.¹

Well, that clears up the data about the Trinity, doesn't it! The Trinitarian section of the creed goes on for two more paragraphs. Sometime read this great document. But frankly, it is difficult to grasp. Here is the summary, which all of you know well: God is three persons in one God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father. God is both one and triune.

¹¹ *Quicumque Vult*, commonly called The Creed of St. Athanasius, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 864-865.

That is the theology of the Trinity, the information if you will. But so what? What does it mean? What does it have to do with living the Christian life, or the Great Commandment or the Great Commission? What does it have to do with loving God and one another? More to it, what does it have to do with worship, and why should we care?



One of my favorite writers, G.K. Chesterton, wrote this in his essay *The Everlasting Man*, “If we really want a simple religion of love, we must look for it in the Athanasian Creed.”² What Chesterton is saying is this: to confess that God is a Trinity of persons is exactly the same as confessing God is love. They are just

GOD=LOVE

different ways of saying the same thing. Why?

Because God IS Love. “God is love” is not saying God loves, or love is an attribute of God. Most religions say that. No, the True God is love itself through and through; the very being or essence of God is love. Therefore, within his being there has to be a lover, a beloved and the love shared between them, a trinity of persons. That’s inherent in the phrase “God is love.”

Don’t sentimentalize this essence of God being love itself. In the Old Testament we learn the name of God, “I AM THAT I AM.” He is being itself. He is Holy Other. In fact, as Kathryn Tanner describes, he is “Otherly Other,” without competition or contrast. He created everything (“the heavens and the earth,” we say in the Nicene creed) and is Otherly Other than his creation, and yet he is insinuated and even revealed throughout that creation. In the New Testament we discover, however, the explanation of “I AM THAT I AM” in understanding that God IS love itself.

Our God is a community of love. The Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved, and the Holy Spirit is love shared between the Father and the Son. St. Augustine said it this way: from all eternity, God knows himself. So, the Father is the knower, the Son is the known, and the Spirit is the knowledge between them. St. Bernard used this construct: The Father is the kisser, the Son is the kissed, and Holy Spirit is the kiss between them. The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth stated that the

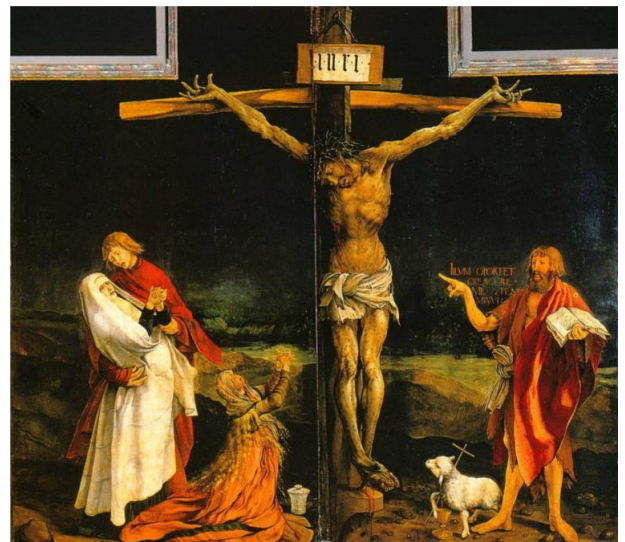
² <http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/chesterton/everlasting/part2c4.htm>

Father is the speaker (*Deus dixit*), the Son is the Word spoken, and the Spirit is the interpreter of the Word through the church. The Trinity is a dynamo of energy and self-emptying love. God doesn't hoard this love, but empties himself in love for the entire created order.

Why do we exist? Not because God needs us. The beginning of real spirituality is to understand this truth: God has no need of us. Rather we (particularly), and in fact the entire created order, are simply loved into existence. Why? Because God's Triune being is such a white hot intensity of love, that it spills over into the world that we know. In St. Augustine's words, this whole cosmos is made in the *imago trinitatis*. We are loved into existence.

Jesus was THE emissary *par excellence* for this community of love, with the purpose of bringing this fallen world back into that intensity of the divine life—not just so we can be ethically upright, not just to forgive us of our sinfulness, but so that we may be trinitized, to make us like God, to fully reconcile us to God. That is why we are to make disciples of all nations, to love our neighbors and our enemies: so that the world may be trinitized, brought back to the divine life of God. This is revealed in John 3:16-17, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God so loved the world (that he created in love) that he sent his only Son.

He sent his Son. Theologian Fr. Robert Barron says, “The cross is the moment when the tensive unity of these three divine persons is on most vivid display.”³ God so loved the world that he sent not just one more prophet, spokesperson, or emissary, but his only begotten Son, the one he loved with the eternal love. Why? “So we might be gathered into the dynamics of the divine life.”⁴



Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece

³ From Sermon on May 8, 2008, <http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/why-the-trinity-matters/793/>.

Much of the material in this section comes from that sermon.

⁴ Ibid.

Where did the Father send the Son? “All the way down to [rescue] us, down into time, into history, into the human condition.”⁵ But that wasn’t even far enough. We had fallen into sin and its resulting death. He was sent “into our dysfunction, into our hatred and violence, into our stupidity, injustice and fear,”⁶ all the way even to the God-forsakenness of an ignominious death on a Roman instrument of torture. Why did the Father do such a terrible thing? He did it out of love, because that’s all that he is. “He wanted to bring his divine life even into the darkest places. He wanted to hunt us down, even to the furthest limits of our wonderings from him. He wanted to follow us even to the darkest corner where we try to retreat from him.”⁷ So he sent the Son, all the way down into God-forsakenness. “What kept the Son, even on his downward journey, tethered to the Father? It was nothing other than the love that connects the Father and the Son; it was nothing other than the Holy Spirit.”⁸ As the Son stretched into the depths of God-forsakenness to rescue us, the Spirit kept him tethered to the Father.

That is why we are saved by the Trinitarian God. The God who is a trinity of persons, who is love itself, can reach all the way down in this acrobatic act of love so as to gather us in. That is why the Trinity is not a theological abstraction; rather it is the whole of the spiritual life. In his book *Mysterium Paschale*, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, “In Jesus Christ’s death, Descent into Hell and Resurrection, only one reality is there to be seen: the love of the triune God for the world, a love which can only be perceived through a co-responsive love.”⁹

It is because God is a communion of love that you and I can respond, or enter into the divine life. This is the Gospel we proclaim in worship. This is the Gospel we sing, dance, re-enact, and depict.

In Philippians 2, Paul records this great hymn of the early church:

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 262.

bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (RSVCE).

The primal sin, the sin of Adam, is a grasping after God, an arrogating to ourselves the prerogatives and power that is God's alone. Human self-elevation is the problem. The solution to human self-elevation is divine self-abnegation. We humans deify ourselves. Adam tried to assume the form of God, but God assumed the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of man. This sinful self-elevation of humankind is only reversed by God's self-emptying love in Christ. The pride of mankind is broken by the humility of the divine.

Here is a spiritual principle—take it to the bank. The only way up is down. As St. Peter proclaimed, we killed the author of life¹⁰ through our hubristic grasping after self-exaltation. So God in Christ by the Holy Spirit descended to the very bottom of hell to rescue us—and draw us back up into the dance of the Triune God. In the *Divine Comedy*, we see that Dante's descent into the depths of hell is turned around (or reversed) by his repentance and submission to transforming purification as he ascends to heaven. The only way up is down.

So, how do we honor the Trinity in worship? Not just by naming the three persons, although that's a start. Not even just by exploring their economy, although that's a big improvement. No, rather "let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Submit to the same attitude as Jesus. Allow your very life to be poured out, emptied in love, in humble, servant love, in joyful self-abnegating love, for your congregation, your family, your community. To honor the Trinity, submit to this invitation of the Trinitarian God's *perichoretic* dancing embrace, that embrace of radical, white hot, generous love and reconciliation. Come to the dance, but bring with you a loving, welcoming embrace, a generous, reconciling embrace, an embrace for your neighbor, your enemy and the entire created order."



Perichoresis
(From FaithDance.org)

Engage in acts of love to celebrate the Trinity! Dance with God, and invite those you love into that same dance.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Hart presented "Truly Trinitarian Worship" as the June 2015 Presidential Address at IWS. [Audio and video recordings of this talk are available.](#)

¹⁰ Acts 3:15