

Enduring Principles Series

Trinity: God Is Love

by Don Compier



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As the church engages in sustained reflection on the Enduring Principles that bind us together, we do well to reflect very intentionally on the foundation and source from which they emerge and to whom they seek to point: a majestic, awesome, yet deeply compassionate God.

Community of Christ always has insisted that we do not impose dogmatic formulations on persons as tests of fellowship. We understand that God cannot be conveyed fully or adequately in human words. We deeply value each individual's quest for a very personal understanding of the ultimate reality that calls for an ever-growing relationship. Yet our community of faith also relishes expressions of our sense of shared identity and common mission. Some reflect the unique insights emerging from our particular journey as a people. Others of equal importance affirm the heritage we share with all Christians.

Like the vast majority of past and present Christians, Community of Christ understands God as "one in three persons, blessed Trinity." In our modern world some people struggle with this core teaching. It may seem needlessly complex, affirmed simply for the sake of tradition, and lacking in relevance.

We must take note, however, of the way that reflection on the Trinity has become one of the leading themes in recent Christian theology (faith seeking understanding). Moreover, representatives of all schools of thought—process, feminist, liberation, liberal, evangelical, orthodox—have joined this lively conversation. As usual, good theology emerges from disciplined devotional practices. In spirituality, too, reflection on the Trinity helps many to walk more closely with God. Let's consider, then, some ancient roots of this vital doctrine, as well as reasons for its continuing relevance.

After much reflection and conflict, the Christian church established the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century CE. But its roots go back much further and are found in the witness of various biblical books of both testaments. The people of Israel knew that God was vastly different from creation, including humans, and how dangerous it was for people to cast God in their own image. They experienced how God freely and graciously entered into their lives in intimate ways.

So while the writers of the Old Testament praised God as supreme ruler of the universe, they also extolled the Spirit as the breath of God, filling creation, giving and sustaining life in all its variety. The early church inherited all of these insights and expanded them through reflections on God's work in and through Jesus. Every page of the New Testament reflects the wonder of persons who encountered God when the prophet from Nazareth entered their lives. They attempted to bear witness by calling him Christ, God's anointed, and even Lord, a term usually reserved for the Holy One. God's Spirit empowered them to become a diverse community, to proclaim good news, and to live in hope. It was entirely natural, then, to baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The language of the fourth century, about "person" and "essence," may seem philosophically abstract to us, but those who formulated it were doing their best to profess their belief that the various ways we experience divine activity point to one marvelous God. So when Jesus and his message transform our lives, the same God is at work as the one who brought all creation into being—the same one who gives us strength, comfort, and insight in intimate spiritual experiences.

The doctrine of the Trinity praises God, who can work in so many ways, yet for the same end, seeks to bind all of creation together in one loving embrace.

Ancient peoples took community for granted as the foundational reality of their lives (see I Corinthians 12, for instance). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Western individualism and communist collectivism threatened genuine community. Contemporary writers on the Trinity therefore underscore the implications of ancient teaching for human life together and for human relationships with all of creation.

We might express the renewed insights gained by seeing the doctrine of the Trinity as an interpretation of what it means to say that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8). Confident that God really does disclose the divine self to us, affirming that God is Triune means that God is community. Establishing true community is something God always does because God is communitarian through and through. God's own being honors diverse gifts—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—while always stressing that all is done for the sake of the whole. Community modeled on the Trinity always will seek to respect individual rights and the entire web of connections.


These reflections should resonate in *Community* of Christ, which throughout its history has sought to establish the cause of Zion. We know, perhaps better than most, how human attempts to establish ideal communities are frustrated time and again. Yet the Triune community gives us hope, for if God is community, and community is of God, in the end all things are destined for joyous relationships.

If we humans are, as the Bible affirms (Genesis 1:26), made in God's image, we are made in the image of Trinity, of true community. We cannot fulfill our purpose in any other way than to be builders of communities of joy, hope, love, and peace.

Over many centuries Christians have not hoped for the fulfillment of our notions of community, but for the fulfillment of God's Triune work. Through witness, Christ, and the indwelling power of the Spirit, God intends to bring all of us together in the loving community of the Trinity's divine life.

May all that we do and say serve this wondrous purpose. May these Enduring Principles, in all their human frailty, continually point the church back to its only foundation, the source of all of its life, the end of all its striving, and empower us to reach out to all of creation in love.

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