

When is God Triune?

(Presentation, September 6, 1988. Later published in dialog 28,
No. 2

(Spring, 1989): 133. Permission granted by dialog)

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1. When is God triune? Always? Or only when reconciling the world in Christ? The question may sound a bit overweening, but it does raise a point.
2. What is useful about the question is that it suggests that God is indeed found apart from Christ, and that God without Christ, though all too real, is not good for us, and that only as God is good for us is God triune.
3. Another way to put the same question is to ask, Isn't it only as a gracious God, a successfully gracious God, that God is triune? Isn't triunity a corollary of divine mercy, not of divine wrath?
4. The question is not, Is the God who comes to us as triune in Christ "really" triune, triune in "himself," triune "in person," in se? the answer to that question is, Yes, of course. But that is not now the question, whether the "economic" Trinity is also an "immanent" Trinity?
5. The question is rather the other way around, Is God triune immanently, internally, even when not acting historically in a gracious, triune way, as God has been known to do?
6. When God comes not as the fond Parent whose Child brothers us into his Spirited family but instead (as Erasmus flung at Luther) as the God "who saves so few and damns so many," already now and here, what could possibly be triune about God then, either economically or immanently?
7. The need is not only to equate God's identity with God's

historical economy but to ask first, Which economy? Suppose there is also, as Paul thought, an alternative economy, a “dispensation of death,” which is deadly just because it too reflects who God can be immanently. But that economy, which as such is no business of ours except as it is sublimated in Christ, reflects not only no divine grace but also no triunity.

8. Of course we can always by fiat of definition insist on reasoning backwards, top-downwards. We can pretend that the trinity is the first and only thing to be known about God, the sole source from which as from an axiom everything else must be inferred. Beginning thus in reverse we should scarcely be surprised at our conclusion that ergo God could be nothing but gracious, some very accredited experience, including biblical experience, to the contrary notwithstanding.
9. Neither is it surprising that such trinitarian apriorism must then spend itself in speculating whether God’s economy in Jesus is furthermore essential to God’s identity. Indeed it is, but not “furthermore.” Isn’t the “indeed” where theology starts, not arrives, in the rough-and-tumble victory of forgiveness over judgment in the Cross and Easter? The rest follows.
10. Our leading question, When is God triune, is of course not asking about the trinity’s age: How long has God been triune? Or, since when? Not that such questions of “dating” are necessarily frivolous, though they might have preoccupied our predecessors unduly with footnoting the trinity in the Hebrew scriptures.
11. As for dating the Trinity, one such predecessor found it at least as useful to ask, How long has the triune God been human? (Answer: [at that time] “about 1540 years.”) Such frisky talk could also be accommodated by our question, When is God triune, without in any way

mitigating that the trinity is “before all ages.” The trinity is ontologically prior to all creation—in that sense, as Vigilus of Thapsus noted, prior also to Jesus though not for that reason separable from him.

12. I suppose the answer to our question need not be categorically negative, namely, that god as “hidden” cannot be triune. But much less is the answer categorically affirmative, namely, that God always and in every relationship must be triune. Isn’t it enough that God is triune, for us humans and really, in Jesus the Christ? Apart from Christ, and God can be that, any trinity is simply meaningless, unwarranted, hidden. And hidden it had best remain.
13. It is not that in Jesus the Christ we know that God is triune even beyond the Christ relationship. No, in Jesus the Christ we know that God is triune exactly in that relationship. Another, “older” side of God can be known, true, but that knowing is neither new nor viable.
14. Let not the new trinitarianism, by itself so promising, now lapse into an ontological alibi for diminishing the Gospel’s distinctiveness from the Law. Surely one of those distinctions is the sheer immensity of what all the God of the gospel rescues us from, namely, God’s own self, even though it took being triune to do all that, because it took Christ.

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September 6, 1988