

The Holy Trinity – Epistle

CHILDREN OF GOD

Romans 8:12-17

The Holy Trinity

Analysis by Ron Starenko

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh – 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

DIAGNOSIS: Children of the Flesh

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Enslaved*

The opening statement of the Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW) baptismal liturgy asserts something that is culturally and, religiously speaking, unpopular, that “we are children of a fallen humanity” (LBW, p. 121). Paul, even Jesus, in their presentation of the good news, began with a given of human existence, “the spirit of slavery” (v. 15). One of the early church fathers put the whole matter in these terms: In the beginning we were able not to sin; after the fall we are not able not to sin; in the world to come we will not be able to

sin. It's the situation in the middle that speaks of our bondage. The word Paul uses is "flesh" (v. 13). Despite our denials, the apostle observes what seems self-evident: "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:18-19). Even non-theologians speak about our addictions, compulsions, needs, and our dark side.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Fearful

Such lack of will power is enough to strike fear in our hearts. It is the nature of the enslaved to "fall back into fear" (v. 15). We are caught in a no-win situation. Fearing the consequences of our actions, whether by self-criticism, or the criticism of others, or God's criticism, we seek to redeem ourselves by willing to do "what is right" (7:18). Then, unable to do what we will, our fear becomes hate, and the result is the downward spiral of slavery, as fear drives us away from and against God, deeper into our slavery to the flesh.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Disinherited

In his understanding of Paul's theology, Martin Luther called this "the bondage of the will," a situation in which all humanity deserves God's judgment. Unfortunately, the fate of "children of a fallen humanity" is to be disinherited. "Debtors" (v. 12) have no rights before God, and children of the flesh deserve to die, alone and afraid. Frightfully, that is a given.

PROGNOSIS: Heirs With Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Adopted

Why suffer through such a diagnosis? Surely not just to be reminded about the extent of our need, which is real enough. Why else, than to know and believe "the immeasurable riches of (God's) grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7)? Listen to the Lord Jesus. Did he not say that a slave,

flat out, is not welcome in the Father's house (John 8:35)? And, did he not also say, "if the Son makes you free you are free indeed" (8:36)? It took someone who was already the Son of God to make our adoption possible. Paul understood this transaction. According to Roman law, to get into a new family a son or a slave had to be bought by the new father. The slave had no rights and the son might have had debts, and the new father assumed all of that, granting full rights, even inheritance to the new family member. Likewise, the heavenly Father paid the ransom, forgave the debt, as Paul wrote, "by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (v. 3-4), in which we "have received a spirit of adoption" (v. 15), as "the children of God" (v. 14).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Duly Witnessed*

That adoption has been duly witnessed and notarized, the Holy Spirit "bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (v. 16). There is now no need to fall back into fear. There is instead a rising up in the joy of new life. The baptismal liturgy continues: "In the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ" (LBW, p. 121). That is what we have received from "the Lord, the giver of life," what we believe, what we live in, what we rejoice in.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *A Newfound Freedom*

Along with this new identity comes a newfound freedom. Once more from the baptismal liturgy: "In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ...As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God" (LBW, p. 121). Like Son, like

sisters and brothers. The maturing children of God that we are, heirs with Christ, we take on the traits of the crucified and risen Son: faithful, loving, obedient, willing even to “suffer with him” and waiting also to be “glorified with him” (v. 17). Such is the freedom of the children of God.