

The Trinitarian Dogma

Colleagues,

This coming Sunday is the Festival of The Holy Trinity. Herewith some random reflections.

1. There is a LCMS congregation here in St. Louis whose official name is "Saint Trinity Lutheran Church." Usually saints are human beings. This time it's the deity. The current pastor explains the curiosity this way: in the late 1800s a Concordia Seminarian, wanting to help "Heilige Dreifaltigkeits Lutherische Kirche" become more English-friendly, looked into his German-English dictionary and found that the noun "Heiliger" = Saint. "Heilig" as adjective is "holy." But he opted for the noun. None of the other German members objected, and so it has been ever since—Saint Trinity.
2. On a more serious note: The doctrine of the Trinity has become a hot topic in academic theology in the last couple of decades. Some of the leading names are Lutheran, but there are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Reformed Protestants also active in the discussion. In my "senior years" I've not tried to keep up with it. There's just too much and I don't read very fast. And some of it that I have peeked into is fairly arcane so far as I can tell. I let former students (such as Gary Simpson, prof at Luther Seminary in St. Paul MN) keep me posted about some of what's going on.
3. Karl Barth and Karl Rahner—Swiss and German, Reformed and Roman Catholic, resp., two Goliaths of 20th century theology—are credited with pushing the Trinity back onto the agenda. More recent—and still living—are such "new trinitarians" as Juergen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg,

Robert Jenson, Eberhard Juengel, John Ziziouelos, Catherine LaCugna, Ted Peters and Elizabeth Johnson.

4. In a recent major paper for a mission theology conference (Fall 2005) at his seminary Simpson has unpacked the outlines of this “new trinitarianism” and after filtering out remnants he still finds in it of “the Sabellian modalism which the early church condemned,” spins out a Trinitarian mission theology that comes clearly in focus through the prism of law-promise lenses. It’s too big a piece for me to summarize beyond this. Should you want to know more, ask him about it. gsimpsonATluthersem.edu
5. When I first read Gary’s paper, I tweaked him for bypassing my German mentor, Werner Elert, as he traced the roots of the new trinitarianism. In the Summer Semester 1953, three of us Concordia Seminary alums were hearing Elert’s lectures in dogmatics at the University of Erlangen. Here are some of the “Feste Saetze” from my notes of 53 yrs ago (literally “solid sentences” that Elert would dictate to us summarizing what he’d just told us in the lecture). Here are a few of them interspersed with some extrapolations of my own.
 1. There are really only two “dogmas” in Christian theology, the Ttrinitarian dogma and the Christological dogma. [Perhaps “justification by faith alone” might be considered a dogma by the definition proposed below, but if the first two were appropriated aright, such a third wouldn’t be needed.]
 2. A “dogma” (according to what the early church meant by the term) is NOT what you’ve “gotta” believe in order to be a Christian, but what “has to be” at the center of Christian preaching in order to make that proclamation “Gospel.” Elert’s simple “fester Satz” was “Dogma ist das Sollgehalt des Kerygmas.”

3. Thus the variety of proposals debated in the early church for both the Trinitarian dogma and the Christological dogma are finally to be measured by the kerygma, by the NT proclamation.
4. The “correct” Trinitarian formulation is the one that best gives us language for talking about God as Gospel. Ditto for the “correct” Christological formula.
5. E.g., Sabellius’ Trinitarian formula might be stated thus: God is a unitary “X” (a “monon,,” a one-thing) behind all the “modes” of his showing himself to us as creator, redeemer and sustainer. But once you leave the “real God,” as the unknown still mysteriously behind all the modes, why can’t Zeus, the Buddha, Vishnu, or the Koran be equal “modes” of God’s connecting with us? And that “mysterious X” sounds like deus absconditus, whom to seek or contemplate has drastic consequences, according to NT proclamation.
6. Same is true of Arius’s early-4th-century proposal for Christology. Its defect is that its “good news quotient” is not “good enough” for what’s needed if “God was indeed in Christ reconciling sinners unto himself, making Christ (who knew no sin) to BE sin for us, so that we sinners might become—hang onto your hats!—the very righteousness of God!” The Good News in Arius’s Christology is too small. His Christ is too small.

[If for some Thursday this summer the ThTh well is running low, I’ll post some more of Elert’s “Feste Saetze,” especially the sequence that links the Trinitarian dogma with law/promise theology. That linkage was sharply challenged last month in Bob Jenson’s article in The Christian Century, May 2, p. 31-35.

Major “new trinitarian” that he is (with a lengthy section about it in this article) Jenson later on tells the CC readers that he is “appalled” by “those who use ‘justification by faith’—or in the especially aggravated case of Lutherans, the ‘law and gospel’ distinction—to fund their antinomianism.”

He may be talking about us, perhaps thinking of us as such villains. But then again, maybe not. That could be another item for ThTh summertime reflection. In his earlier teaching years at Gettysburg Luth. Seminary, Jenson (now 75ish) taught the Lutheran Confessions and with team-mate Eric Gritsch published the book on Law’Gospel confessionalism that is still a classic. We used it all the time in Seminex. But now for Jenson it’s a no-no. As Alice said: “Things get curiouser and curiouser.”]

6. Back to a bit of whimsy. My 2002 student Yossa Way, an Anglican priest from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, told us that much of his family is Muslim. And in that family is a teasing cousin (male) who constantly tweaks Yossa about his religion: “You worship three gods and have only one wife. We worship one God and may have three wives.” You can guess what his cousin thought was the better option.
7. Which segues to the standard big stumbling blocks for Muslims about the Christian faith: the Trinity and a crucified Jesus. From what I know, the barricade is fundamentally cerebral. How can one God also be a troika? It doesn’t compute. How could God let such a holy prophet as Jesus die? That doesn’t compute either. So in the Koran Allah’s monism is kept pure in distant monarchian solitude, and Allah’s fairness is kept inviolate with Jesus rescued from dying before he is finished. Seems to me that what’s needed is for Christians to articulate both

of these ancient dogmas (Trinity and Christology) as Good News—not only for Muslims, but for ourselves. Have not both dogmas been “taught and learned” by us Christians as the “true statements” about the deity and about the Christ? So it was in my remembered parochial school catechesis.

8. If both dogmas are actually “Sollgehalt des Kerygmas,” the wine in the wineskins of Good News proclamation, then they are to be presented as just that. Elert liked to call this the “paraclesis” of the Paraclete, the encouraging Good Word coming from the third person of the Trinity. The dogma of the Trinity and the Christological dogma are “paraclesis,” encouraging Good News. The Paraclete’s job-description, along with the substance of that “paraclesis,” was the topic in last Sunday’s Pentecost Gospel reading. Jesus speaking: “When the Paraclete comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. . . . The Paraclete . . . will not speak on his own [but] will take what is mine and declare it to you.” This job-description for the third person of the Trinity lies behind Luther’s phrase “Christum-treiben.” The Holy Spirit is not hyping his own agenda of “spiritual” stuff. Instead he is the “Christ-hustler.” The Holy Gust blows Christ to people and vice versa.
9. It may appear as no big deal to get the Christological dogma hooked to the Good News, but how about the Trinitarian dogma—with all those diagrams we saw in Sunday School: triangles, three interlocking rings, etc. Yes, it’s hard to get Gospel out of such godly geometry. But God has messed up the geometry already. To wit, we need to remember that since the incarnation (beginning at Bethlehem, and now full-cycle to Ascension) there is now a human being in one of those triangle corners. There is one

of us—even more, a brother—in one of these three rings. That does mess up the symmetry of the geometry. But that is what it took, according to the Christian kerygma, to get Good News into God-talk.

10. Luther isn't the only one who proclaimed Trinity as Good News, but he did do it with a flair. For example, at the very end of his Large Catechism section on the Trinitarian Creed:

*“Here in the Creed you have the entire essence of God, his will, and his work exquisitely depicted in very short but rich words. In them consists all our wisdom, which surpasses all the wisdom, understanding, and reason of men. Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God is and what he thinks and does, yet it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself.”*As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit. [N.B., the “reverse” sequence (third article to second article to first article): Holy Spirit connects us to Christ, who connects us to the Father's favor and grace. Good News from one end to the other.]

“These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and

distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Note Luther's line of reasoning: "heathen, Turks [=the word for Muslims in his day], Jews, etc. believe in and worship" the only God there is, but they lack Trinitarian [=Good News] connection with this one, true God. Thus they "remain" in the "bad news" dilemma of all humankind who do not "have" Christ as Lord, but have some other Lord. It's not "believing" the right things about who is Lord, but "having" as "my Lord" (remember Thomas's confession) the one who is Lord over eternal wrath and damnation. The key is having the crucified and risen Christ as your own Lord. And with that Trinitarianism we're back to the Christology of the theology of the cross—the two ancient dogmas cheek by jowl, and all of it Good News. Definitely something to celebrate this coming Sunday.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Here are two "interesting" web-references to past ThTh postings.

http://agonist.org/techadvisor/20060529/the_purpose_driven_life_takers

<http://www.asianchristianart.org/>