

1 + 1 + 1 = 1?

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Psalm 108: 1-6
John 14: 9-11
Acts 2: 38-39
Matthew 28: 19

I had a conversation with a parent at my children's school a few weeks ago. He was interested in the fact that I am a pastor at a Mennonite church. After the initial niceties he told me that he goes to the Unitarian Universalist Church. Then he got down to business. "What do you think about Jesus? Was he God?" A simple question to answer in the potluck line.

By the time I got done qualifying my answer by saying that the official Mennonite teaching is that Jesus was divine and that we do believe in the trinity but there would be a variety of beliefs at our congregation in Hyattsville – there was his 2 year old needing noodles and my 4 year old angling for juice and ...that was the end.

It got me thinking about the trinity again especially after Keith Swartzendruber brought up his own questions a few months back. Keith had gone to a Muslim and Christian dialogue where they were seeking to find common ground and ways to work at peace. The sticking point for Muslims in the discussion was that as Christians we claim to be monotheistic, but we believe in three Gods, not one. Of course we maintain that it is all one God but how do we explain that to other people? How do we explain it to ourselves?

The Mennonite Confession of Faith in the commentary from Article 1 says this:

"We worship the one holy and living God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally. To confess that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to confess that the Son and the Holy Spirit are fully divine. It is also to confess that God is one and that God's oneness is the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Confessing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit emphasizes the shared work of creation, salvation and the final consummation."

I confess that is not all it says but I also confess that I find that to be too much jargon for me. I need to go somewhere else for help understanding trinity.

While the trinity is a tenet of our faith as Mennonites and most of Christianity it is not in the bible as a teaching. The formal understanding of the Trinity came several hundred years later after the New Testament texts were written.

Let's listen to what we do have from the bible. First a reading from Psalm 108 that is definitely not Trinitarian. This is a picture of God, the one God.

Psalm 108

*My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make melody.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn.
I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples,
and I will sing praises to you among the nations.
For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens,
and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.*

*Be exalted, O God, above the heavens,
and let your glory be over all the earth.
Give victory with your right hand, and answer me,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.*

This text from the Jewish tradition is unequivocally monotheistic. While we hear God being called God and Lord, these are two names for the same God. This is not to be confused with Jesus being called Lord in the New Testament.

Let's turn to the gospels and a text from John 14. The writer of John had a very different experience and agenda when this text was written.

John 14:9-11

Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen Abba God. How can you say 'Show us your Abba?' Don't you believe that I am in Abba God and God is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is Abba God, living in me, who is accomplishing the works of God. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me, or else believe because of the works I do.

Here we see the case being made that Jesus and God are one, that there is a relationship that defies understanding, or at least defies the understanding of Philip. Who is this Jesus really, is he God or is he human? What does it mean - "it is God living in me who is accomplishing the works of God"? Is that different than you or me saying that Jesus is in my heart or that we all are made in the image of God? Or as the Quakers say "all people have the Light - (John 1:9), we all have God within us." What does this mean for monotheism, that Jesus was "one with God." How offensive was this to the Jews?

In Acts 2 we are presented with the Holy Spirit. Here all three names of the trinity are present but it is not clear that they are all the same "person." They sound distinctly different to my ears.

Acts 2:38-39

Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

The believer is baptized in the name of Jesus, receives the Holy Spirit and knows that she is called by God. Each part of the trinity is named and each has a distinctive role in the believer's life.

Finally in Matthew we find the Trinitarian formula with which we are familiar.

Matthew 28:16-20

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.** And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*

Acts and Matthew were written during the same time period. I try to imagine how the writers of the gospels might have influenced each other. Perhaps the writer of Matthew had seen or heard this account about baptism that Luke records in Acts. Maybe Matthew wordsmithed it a bit, pulling it all together: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

But it is not until over a hundred years later that Christians actually began trying to name this phrase: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the trinity. Tertullian, the curmudgeon of the curmudgeons theologian – as he is called by Kathleen Norris, is thought to have first used the term trinity in the late 2nd century. And he used this helpful metaphor. Think of the trinity as a plant: with God the Creator as the deep root, Jesus the Son as the shoot or trunk and the Holy Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance, "fructifying the earth with flower and fruit." (*Amazing Grace*) The three is one.

For centuries it has been important to theologians to understand how this all works: which comes first - the Father or the Son? And where does the Spirit come from? Indeed these are questions that have split the church.

*Eastern Orthodox Christians affirm that the Father is the **source** of the unity of the Trinity. The Father begets the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.*

*Western Christians affirm these same truths except that they believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father **and** the Son.* (Kendra Hotz
ww.explorefaith.org)

Other theologians more recently have challenged the language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as well as the order in which they are recited. Wasn't the Spirit present when Jesus was conceived, so how could it come from Jesus? Wasn't the Spirit present at creation so did the Father really come from the Spirit? And if "*In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God*" then perhaps all of God emanates from the Son. Language is imperfect to explain the concept and numbers (the three in one) or 1+1+1 are not accurate either.

Though we do continue trying. Almost every theologian has her or his own language to try and describe this dynamic and inexplicable concept of 3 that is 1. Elizabeth Johnson in *She Who Is* cites numerous examples.

- Karl Barth calls the trinity the Revealer, the Revelation and the Revealedness.
- Letty Russell's description is this: "Creator, Liberator and Advocate who calls human beings into partnership with divine care for the world."
- The eleventh century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, says: "There is a brightness, a flashing forth and a fire and these three are one, connecting all creation together in compassion."

In the trinity we are dealing with mystery and the unknown and yet we are aware that one of the most important things that is illustrated in the concept of the trinity is that of intimate relationship. This is at the heart of our faith as Christians. Whether we use "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," or "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer," or "origin, mediator and driving force of liberation" – (Leonardo Boff) the description is not as important as the model. We have three equals in relationship, inextricably linked and working together. In the trinity we are given a picture not of a hierarchy of gods but of a mysterious mutuality at work.

One might conclude that with an image like the trinity that demonstrates this kind of mutuality and integration, peacefully working together that this would also be our story as Christians – peaceful mutuality, at least within the church. Unfortunately the hierarchy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit has prevailed in most places.

Admittedly, it is extremely difficult to wrap the mind around this, three but only one. It is so unusual to see this kind of relationship among people that metaphors from nature are easier to grasp. *Wellspring, river and irrigation channel, or fire, its brightness and warmth* perhaps make more sense. And yet if we take this route we miss the whole point of the relational aspect of God. God wants to be in relation with us and we are to be in relation with God and with each other, just as God is a model of relationality.

We have this gift in God that demonstrates justice in relationship though of course it is so mysterious as to be unattainable for us as humans. Is that any reason to abandon it? As Anabaptists we are used to striving for the impossible. We embrace something as thorny as the Sermon on the Mount as central to our faith.

Yet we err if we assume that we truly understand the trinity or have the answers about God. The more we search for the explanation of the trinity, the mystery of God, the more we discover that in the words of Elizabeth Johnson "The triune God is not simply unknown, but positively known to be unknown and unknowable – which is a dear and profound kind of knowledge." (*She Who Is*)

Let us not shy away from trying to know the unknown and unknowable. We are called into relationship, we are pulled into relationship, we are propelled into relationship with God and with each other and with the world. In the end it is the simple relationship of the *breath - through our bodies - that gives us life - that is the trinity.*

As I did with the children, I invite you, as you are comfortable, to breathe with me:

We breathe in that which is God, Creator, Source, Brightness
breathe in that which is Jesus, Liberator, Revelation, a flashing forth
and breathe in that which is the Spirit. Sustainer, Advocate, fire
And in that mysterious breath we find our life.