

## “THE LIVING TRINITY”

Isaiah 6:1-8

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“What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life” (p. 2)?

Brian McLaren asks these questions in the introduction to his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*. Some of us explored this book in adult education last year, and the session will be spending time with ideas contained in it for the next few months. As you might guess from the questions, McLaren is trying to address a growing disenchantment with a form of Christianity that is entrenched in its beliefs. He notes that this “system of beliefs has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy pedophilia to white privilege.” The doctrine of the Trinity is not exempt from this problem as Christians have vilified Jews and Muslims for not believing in the doctrine.

Having been steeped in conversation with many of you about this “migration” from Christianity as a system of beliefs to Christianity as a way of life, I was hopeful that McLaren would have some thoughts to offer on this doctrine. I found it odd and interesting at the same time that he makes no reference to this seminal doctrine of Christianity.

I can only guess at his reasons for this omission. Though it certainly has been used to oppress people, this has been less true in more recent years. Today, it is one of those doctrines that cause eyes to glaze over. It reminds us that God is a mystery. We hardly comprehend it and have probably stopped trying. It’s not that we’ve stopped believing it, but I think it doesn’t matter to many Christians today. Perhaps McLaren doesn’t speak about it because we have already migrated away from it?

But still, we preach on it once a year. In the spirit of McLaren’s book, I’m going to talk about the Trinity, not as a doctrine, but as a “just and generous way of life.” And McLaren can help with this. One of the things he points out is that our understanding of God has changed for Christians over the centuries and for individuals over the course of one’s life. Our understanding needs to continue to deepen and adapt if we want our faith to be good for the world. We need a God, he says, “to lead us away from the precipice of cataclysmic war... to save us from paralyzing polarization... to teach us to wisely revere and care for the earth...” (p.102).

Needless to say, the doctrine of the Trinity has historically not prevented the first two, nor promoted the third point. Christians have in fact gone to war against Muslims for their

failure to believe in the three persons of the Trinity. We have done violence to Jews for their refusal to acknowledge Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. We have in fact lumped all Jews together as the ones who crucified Christ. Even within the faith, we have divided ourselves into camps over the failure to believe the doctrine properly, excommunicating those who interpreted the persons of the Trinity by functions or modes. And because we have seen Jesus the mediator between God and humanity, and interpreted the Holy Spirit as a gift to Christians, we have undervalued God's relationship to the rest of creation. At certain points in our history, the doctrine has done more harm than good.

So how did we get into this mess? Part of the problem is our human desire to organize things into a system, and then to treat the system as a statement of facts. Doctrines describe truths about God, ourselves, the church, and the world. Once we've established a truth, we are reluctant to stray from it. We will fight, even kill in some instances, to maintain it. God is one, but in three "persons." Each person is fully God and yet distinct from the others. God is one. If we regard the Trinity as a doctrine, these are the facts. To depart from them is to enter heresy. As has been clear in our history, to say anything further than the facts is to invite criticism.

Thankfully, theologians today have ventured to say more about the doctrine. And, thankfully, the heretic hunters have been mostly quiet. One of the things that is evident in modern treatments of the Trinity is that they no longer see it as a doctrine about God, but about us and our relationship to God as well. McLaren in another book tells us that the doctrine of the Trinity developed from the experiences of the early followers of Jesus. He writes:

By God's parental love, through Christ's beautiful life, death, and resurrection, and through the Holy Spirit, they felt that they had been caught up into this divine communion themselves. God could never again be for them a distant, isolated One to whom they were "the other." Now they knew God as a dynamic and hospitable one-another in whom they lived, moved, and had their being. The Trinity described how they experienced God "from the inside" (pp. 226-227)

A seventy year old man writes on McLaren's website: "For many years, my idea of "Trinity" was that it was something existing "out there" and totally academic thought up by theologians long ago and far away. Upon reflection, I am coming to the realization that our belief in a triune God is a lot more than an intellectual construct, and a lot closer to my everyday life." (<https://brianmclaren.net/a-71-year-old-reader-writes-about-the-trinity/>)

So if we see the Trinity not as a doctrine, but as an observation that flows from human experience; if we see it as not only about God, but about us as well, then what do we learn? Does this make it more adaptable to our time? Does it address the needs of the age for a new understanding of God that does more good than harm?

One God, three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first thing to say is that the

relationships within the Trinity are relationships defined by love. The persons are each fully God and therefore equals, which can be better seen if we refer to them as Creator, Christ, and Spirit. The Trinity describes a God whose nature is communal, a community of equals.

If we see this as describing the nature of humanity, then there is no room for violence. When we see Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists as belonging to the human community, then we must see them as equals. A living Trinity invites us to take the path of healing and reconciliation where we have done harm to another.

One God, three persons. If this is about us, then there is an individual and a community of persons. A living Trinity excludes partisanship in the form of “paralyzing polarities.” We live in relationships defined by love. We express ourselves and we listen to one another. Because we experience God as one, we know that our views and decisions impact the whole community. So we speak and act with the welfare of the other uppermost in our minds.

One God, three persons, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. This more modern way of referring to the Trinity would have been considered heretical in other eras of church history. But today, it reminds us that God’s relationship is not only with people, but with the whole of creation. It reminds us that God’s love is all-inclusive. We experience God as one who creates, who is making things new. We experience God as one who redeems, who is bringing healing to the broken. We experience God as one who continues to speak to each individual heart and to the community of faith. A living Trinity urges us to care for the earth, not use it up; to heal, not destroy; to mend, not break; to do good, not evil; to love, not hate; to make peace, not war.

It’s not a doctrine in the sense of a belief, frozen in place for all time. It’s a story of God’s interaction with the world long ago... and in the present time. Too often we have been in the temple like Isaiah with a vision of God whose hem filled the place, a vision of God that makes us tremble. If people have discarded the Trinity, it’s because it did nothing for them. It either made them tremble, or it bore no relationship to their life.

If it is to come alive for us, then we must allow it to touch us as the hot coal touches the lips of Isaiah. We must feel it. We must feel God, the one whose love we experience in a multitude of ways. Only then will we be able to say, “Here am I, send me.” Amen.

Resources:

Brian D. McLaren. *We Make the Road by Walking*. Jericho Books, 2014.

Brian D. McLaren *The Great Spiritual Migration* Convergent: New York NY, 2016.