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Teaching the Trinity

David P. Meyer

"In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more rewarding." (St. Augustine)

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* asks, "How does one preach the Trinity?" and answers, "One does not preach it at all!" What one does in preaching and catechesis is the providing of a wealth of scriptural material, sound exegesis, exposition, and explication! Even the *Catechism of Trent* postponed the Trinity doctrine till later, addressing such only after a wealth of biblical texts dealing Christ and God as creator and savior.¹ So we must deal with "Philosophical Considerations on Relating the Church's Articulation of the Trinity." Said another way, "How can we do a better job of equipping pastors, teachers, and all those who take it upon themselves the study of Scripture, the Ancient Creeds, Confessional commitment, in order to communicate the good news of the Triune God?"

Let's pretend I am a philosopher for a second! My students consider that long enough. Taking up a systematic text, a student may be offered a definition of the nature of God. After which would follow a triadic account identifying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as holding all the properties of God; thus the Father, F^(P1...N), the Son, J^(P1...N), and the Holy Spirit, S^(P1...N) hold a common set of properties, identifying each as God. Algebra or Leibniz dictates that if F, J, and S hold a common set of properties, by the law of the identity of indiscernibles [(x)(y)[(y=x) > (D)(Dx=Dy)], it follows that F, J, and S are identical and simply one and the same.² "Oneness" theology, in all its varied forms, applauds at this point, quoting John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Which in turn is to echo Exod. 3:14, "I am who I am" and Deut. 6:4, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One!" So, do we now conclude that Jesus is identical with the Father and the Holy Spirit? Not at all! Good catechetical method prevents this conclusion.

¹*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1965, "Trinity," 299-300. Since the work was a catechism, not a dogmatics, the abundant bible references had to be explicated by the catechist – appearing in the margins, not in the body of the text. *Catechismus ex Decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini* (Bassani, 1700), 12-126.

²David Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, (Hazelwood, Mo.: Word Aflame Press). Also Thomas Weisser, *Three Persons from the Bible? Or Babylon*, (Hazelwood, Mo.: Word Aflame Press). Groups identified as oneness denominations are: the United Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Overcoming holy Church of God, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith.

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More algebraic logic is needed! Not only do the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share a common set of God-properties, but also each holds a set of properties distinct one from the other, unshared properties. Thus, something of this form appears: $F^{(P1...N)+(X1...N)} \& J^{(P1...N)+(Y1...N)} \& S^{(P1...N)+(Z1...N)}$, which then moves us to conclude that while F, J, and S hold all the divine properties, each holds properties possessed by none other. The creed says simply, "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but there are not three Gods, but one God." We catechists then add that grammatically the "one" [Hebrew or LXX] as found in Deut. 6:4, as well as the "one" in the Greek of John 10:30 is not the "one" of identity, that is, "one and the same," but the "one-ness" as found in Gen. 2:24, where Adam and Eve are identified as "one" flesh – here both Hebrew and Greek usages are consistent. Clearly Adam and Eve are not identical but "one Flesh!" Adam and Eve are two people but one flesh; so God can be three persons but remain one God! Our catechetical task is done! Or is it?³

Philosophy and the "Theo-Logicians"

Recently, "Theo-logicians"⁴ have complicated our task. Richard Cartwright and Dale Tuggy, in two independent philosophical essays, conclude that the Athanasian Creed is inconsistent, unintelligible, and a poor fit with the Bible – and a contradiction as well!⁵ We must either choose Modalism or

³God is distinguished from the "wisdom of God" and the "word of God," yet God could not ever be God-without-Wisdom, or God-without-Word. "One" may signal that the divine essence is shared with both the "Spirit of God" and the "Son of God." Since God would not be God without "wisdom" – nor God without "word" – both the Spirit and the Son are eternal and share in God's "One-being." See "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, eds. R. J. Feenstra and C. Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 28. [John 10:30] "I and the Father are one" – not the "one" of simple identity, "I am the Father," nor is the text simply a "one-in-purpose" text. It is ontological, but not in the sense 'Theo-logicians' demand. More typically the exegete urges that the Father and the Son share the same essence, or divine nature. John 1:1 has already informed us that the Father and the Son are both God (*theos* not merely *theios*). The Jews saw more to the claim of Jesus than "mere" unity in purpose. John 10:24ff. shows this to be Jesus' claim to be God! "For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; and because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God" (10:33). It is an issue of "being." Students may want to explore manuscript tradition on the relation of John 1:1 and 1:18. Clement, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Epiphanius read the text as "one and only God" rather than *monogenes huios*.

⁴A term I created – philosophers make up new words with ease, as do Germans.

⁵Richard Cartwright, *Philosophical Essays*, 17, available at <http://www.kingsleymc.com/Clark/lists/Eyring/Notes/trinity.html>. The logical problem appears in the following sentences: "The Father is God," "The Son is God," "The Spirit is

Tritheism. The law of identity of indiscernibles concludes that one must choose Modalism, to preserve the sentence, "There is exactly one God," or we must insert an indefinite article before each use of the term "God" and conclude that there are three Gods. Yet, they argue that the Athanasian Creed says we must do both!

Are Creeds True-Contradictions?

David Cunningham, wanting to be Orthodox in the "worst way," capitulates and concludes that the Athanasian Creed is a "true contradiction!"⁶ After all, don't we have para-consistency, multi-value logics, as Wittgenstein has suggested? The temptation of Jesus is offered as a true contradiction: as true God, He is incapable of being tempted; as a man, He can be tempted.⁷ Zwingli and the Nestorians would love Cunningham's example! Randal Rauser, putting the best construction on everything, finds Cunningham's efforts commendable, his examples provocative, but his examples of contradictions are at best paradoxes, yet none is a "true contradiction."⁸

God," "The Father is not the Son," "The Father is not the Holy Spirit," and "The Son is not the Father."

There is exactly one God. Moreover, The Father is neither made, nor created, nor begotten; the Son is from the Father alone, neither made nor created, but begotten; the Holy Spirit from the father and the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding. And what the Father is, such is the Son and such the Holy Spirit.

See Dale Tuggy, *The Trinitarian Dilemma*, available at <http://www.fredonia.edu/departament/Philosophy/tuggy.html>, September 27, 2002. Tuggy views Peter T. Geach, Peter van Inwagen, and Richard Swinburne as examples of Tritheism. "Surely they don't mean to suggest that these persons share a common stuff or matter, or that their three propositions of matter overlap. 'Whatever it is which makes divine persons combine to make a further person' (9). Recently William Alston said, "It is a well known fact, amply borne out by the history of the discussion of the topic, that as soon as one goes beyond the automatic recital of traditional creedal phrase one inevitably leans either in the direction of modalism – the "persons" are simply different aspects of the divine being and/or activity-or tritheism – there really are three Gods, albeit very intimately connected in some way." William Alston, "Swinburne and Christian Theology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 41 (1997): 54. See Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). Dale Tuggy, *Trinitarian Dilemma*, 1.

⁶David Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

⁷See Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, Arthur C. Piepkorn, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), Solid Declaration, III, 14–15, 541 [Hereafter abbreviated as "Tappert"].

⁸Randal Rauser, "Is the Trinity a true Contradiction?" *Quodlibet Journal* 4 (November 2002). This is also available at <http://www.Quodlibet.net>.

But may contradictions or near-contradictions occur where you least expect them? Chemnitz describes ancient philosophers whose accounts of God bear remarkable resemblance to Christian descriptions of God and His nature! World religion experts delight in demonstrating these remarkable similarities. Monism, Islam, Philo, Hindu writings, among others, describe the "Ultimate" in language akin to that of the Christian theology. The two sets of descriptions, pagan and Christian, must describe the same being. Medieval Scholasticism concluded the same; contemporary pluralism does the same; process theologians the same, but offer instead a new account of the nature of God.⁹ Luther, Melancthon and Martin Chemnitz dismissed these similarities as a confusion of nature and grace, a "mixo-philosophico-theological"¹⁰ scholasticism. The law of identity of indiscernibles is wrong! The philosopher's god and the God of supernatural revelation are not the same.¹¹ Identical predicates do not the same god name! In comparison, the philosophers' God is at least feeble, inadequate, and misleading, if not contradictory.

How Do We Proceed?

How should we proceed? Surrender to the "theo-logicians" is not the answer! Can the philosopher teach the old-dog theologian a new trick? Or have the "theo-logicians" pulled a trick on us? I suggest the latter—elementary mathematics doesn't begin with Frege, Q.V.O. Quine's *Word and Object*, or the *Principia Mathematica* of Whitehead and Russell! Mathematics begins with addition, subtraction, multiplication, etc.; number theory and system development comes later. Creeds of the sophistication of the Athanasian Creed grew up from the earthy task of exegesis, reflection, assimilation, and inferences bound up in the language and idiom of Greek and Latin traditions.

Councils attempted to confront pivotal christological issues—seeing necessity in preserving Christ as the full revelation of God and the full salvation of God as promised in the Old Testament! The creeds were never presented as philosophical treatises, proving Monotheism vs. Tritheism, but as an effort to lift up all of the biblical evidence in preaching and teaching. The "theo-logicians" want to skip the task of addition and subtraction, and

⁹Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) is also known for this *Theodicy*, which prompted hostile rejoinders, but was part of a tradition at times too sympathetic to Plato, Philo, Neo-Platonism. The doctrines of gradation, continuity, and fullness of plentitude have a long history—aptly described by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1936).

¹⁰Ingolf U. Dalfer, *Theology and Philosophy* (Williston, Vt.: Blackwell, 1988), 76. This is Dalfer's colorful phrase for describing the Lutheran attitude toward scholasticism at its worst.

¹¹See Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* I, trans. J. A. O. Preus (Concordia, 1989), 51-55.

move directly to number theory and the *Principia* – no wonder “heads spin” when we are all invited to see the Athanasian Creed as simple piece of logic!

How Do We Begin Teaching the Doctrine of the Trinity?

We may begin with the creedal approach, viewing God the Father as creator and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Or we can begin with Christ as redeemer, who speaks of His relation to the Father and the Spirit. Martin Chemnitz chose the latter approach – his full explication of primitive heresies and creedal language appear in *The Two Natures of Christ*. In detail he deals with terms and expressions forged in the heat of early Creedal development, e.g., the hypostatic union, essence, three persons, and communicable attributes.¹² But in exposition of Christ and His work, Chemnitz finds himself creating new models for dealing with biblical texts. The *genus idiomaticum* and *genus apotelesmaticum* were tools for interpretation. The *genus maiestaticum* blossomed in the garden of biblical interpretation, joining itself to the *genus auchematicum*!¹³ Wittgenstein suggested that at times language was “idling” – other times in action. Any definition of the *genus* formulas would be language “idling.” Only in interpretation and dealing with the texts of Scripture do the “categories” come to life! Pannenberg and Elert, as Chemnitz, begin with Christology, thereafter leading us to the Trinity doctrine.¹⁴ Whether one commences with creation or begins with Christ, either beginning soon becomes trinitarian and its goal the same: To place into the lap of sinners the Christ child of Bethlehem, inviting them to follow this Jesus baby from Bethlehem to Golgatha and the empty tomb – and to the promise a world to come void of sin, death, and tears!

Reason, Natural Revelation, Apologetics, and Polemics

Reformed apologists, Ronald Nash as others, write as though Lutherans had no interests in apologetics. Luther's *deus absconditus* theology says otherwise.

¹²Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971). Likewise, Pieper provides a short list of early church expressions which aid in exposition of the Trinity doctrine: *Homoousia*; or *Filioque*; or *Perichoresis*; or even the *omnia opera Trinitatis ad intra sunt indivisa*, etc. George Mather and Larry Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) urge that a solid review of early church theology provides an analytic tool for understanding characteristics of modern sects and cults.

¹³“Where you are able to say, ‘Here is God,’ you must also say, ‘Therefore Christ the man is also there’” (Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1, trans. Walter A. Hansen [St. Louis: Concordia, 1962], 233). To review a shift from ontological Trinity to christological Trinity in Athanasius, see Robert Fox, “The Athanasian Meaning of ‘Being with’ or ‘Of One Substance with the Father,’” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 6 (August 1960): 205-216.

¹⁴Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 211-253; Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wofhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69ff.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians say otherwise. Melancthon duly noted the ambiguity of God's revelation in nature and to reason, crushing the scholastic claim that reason can ascend to God. "While he [God] terrifies us and seems to be casting us into eternal death, human nature cannot bring itself to love a wrathful, judging punishing God."¹⁵ If we leap from Luther to Kierkegaard, bypassing seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmatists, we miss a wealth of polemic and apologetics dealing with Socinians and rationalism—neither of which has gone away. Our students need to review such efforts to see precisely how important sound exegesis is! My list of Lutheran thinkers writing in professional philosophy journals and doing apologetics in the open-field of philosophy is a short list. The list needs to be longer!

Oneness Theology and the New Evangelicalism

Moreover, we need to assist our students in addressing the "Theologians." Originally the creeds blazed a trail between modalism and subordinationism. Today, creeds are viewed as passing between Tritheism and Modalism. Small wonder the "New Evangelicals" can assault successfully the creeds as "Tritheistic."¹⁶ These "New Evangelicals" [Oneness Pentecostalism as well] openly reject the doctrine of the internal relations of God, the immanent Trinity as "pagan philosophy," and present only the Economic Trinity! Jesus, as God's Son, is from Bethlehem—not eternity. "New Evangelicals" see the ancient creeds as philosophical relics, rightly deserving the criticisms of "Theologians," Islam, Judaism, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormonism!

Creeds as Hermeneutical Aids

Finally, confessional Lutheranism and Walther in particular argued that creeds and confessions had an important role in biblical exegesis, concluding that we read Scripture in light of the Confessions. The Athanasian Creed tells

¹⁵Tappert, AP IV, 36, 112.

¹⁶Steve Rudd, "Biblical Trinity Vs. Catholic Trinity," available at <http://www.bible.ca/trinity/trinity-catholic-nicene.htm>. See also David Bernard, *The Oneness of God and Essentials of Oneness Theology* (Hazelwood, Missouri: Word Aflame Press, 1985) or Thomas Weisser, *Three Persons form the Bible? Or Babylon?* (Word Aflame Press, 1983). A fine critique of "Oneness" theology is to be found in Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). To aid our students in dealing with "oneness" theology, we could expose them to a work such as Diogenes Allen's *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, who gives a most sympathetic treatment of Augustine and Aquinas, highlighting God's nature as grace and love. We could expose students to Luther's reflections on Trinity and Paul Althaus' suggestion that we bypass definitions of God as *actus purus*, pure actuality, God's aseity, simplicity, and define God as the "abyss of love." The immediate effect would be that all the "essential attributes" of God would modify His essence as "Love," e.g., God is "wrathful love."

us what errors to avoid in interpretation and what to affirm! From a philosophical point of view, Edward MacKinnon suggests that the Athanasian Creed embraced a diversity of theologies, East and West, not so as to provide a synthesis but a heuristic model for doing theology, a model employing preliminary models for interpreting biblical texts, the teaching the incarnation and the Trinity.¹⁷ John Warwick Montgomery does the same, suggesting that the Creeds are preliminary interpretative models, enabling us to include the totality of the biblical witness in interpretation. The test of the Creeds is not their internal logical consistency, but completeness and soundness in reflecting the biblical witness. Against the "Theo-logicians" John Warwick Montgomery writes this:

The doctrine of the Trinity is not "irrational"; what is irrational is to suppress the biblical evidence for Trinity in favor of unity, or the evidence for unity in favor of Trinity. Our data must take precedence over our models — or, stating it better, our model must sensitively reflect the full range of data. A close analogy to the theologian's procedure here lies in the work of the theoretical physicist: Subatomic light entities are found, on examination, to possess wave properties [W], particle properties (P), and quantum properties [h]. Though these characteristics are in many respects incompatible (particles don't diffract, while waves do, etc.), physicists "explain" or "model" an electron as Pwh. They have to do this in order to give proper weight to all the relevant data. Likewise the theologian who speaks of God as "three in one." Neither the scientist nor the theologian expects you to get a "picture" by way of his model; the purpose of the model is to help you take into account *all* of the facts, instead of perverting reality through super imposing on it a model which leaves out some of the facts! The choice is clear: either the Trinity or a "God" who is only a pale imitation of the Lord of biblical and confessional Christianity.¹⁸

¹⁷Edward MacKinnon, *Truth and Expression* (Mahwah, N.J.: Newman Press, 1971), 156-159. MacKinnon indicates that, to date, post Wittgenstein-language analysis has avoided a genuine effort at understanding religious language. Thirty-plus years after MacKinnon's comment, analysis of scientific semantics still goes on; religious language study falters.

¹⁸John Montgomery, *How Do We Know There is a God? and Other Questions Inappropriate in Polite Society* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), 14-15. A like argument is present in Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ: Did the Early Christians Misrepresent Jesus?* (Great Britain: Mentor, 1997). Bray argues that it is not Platonism that moved the church to the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds but the New Testament itself.