

The Trinity and Humanity

An extract from Tim Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Monarch, 2005)

We were made in the image of the triune God. We find our identity through relationships. Just as there is both unity and plurality in God, so communal identity should not suppress individual identity and individual identity should not neglect communal identity. Through our union with Christ by faith, Christians are being remade in the image of the triune God. The church should be a community of unity without uniformity and diversity without division.

Imagine your church leaders announced that they would like you to bring your last three bank statements and pay slips to the next church meeting. We are going to talk about each other's financial affairs, they explain, and agree what you should do with your money. How would you react? You may think it is good idea, but I suspect the initial reaction of most Christians would be outrage. "My money is my affair," we might say. "I don't want other people telling what to do with it. I earned it and I'll decide how I spend it." That is certainly the attitude in our society. We are a society of individuals. Personal freedom and choice is everything. The political discourse is all about individual consumer rights. We do not want to take responsibility for others. Ultimately I am answerable only to myself. But, when others are also answerable only to themselves, the result is fragmentation and isolation.

The life of God is very different.

1. God is a triune community

Consider the closing words of Jesus prayer on the night before his died:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (John 17:20-26)

It is as if the camera pans up from the actions of God in history and we are swept up into the eternal being of God. We see for a moment the inner life of God. Three times Jesus speaks of the Father's love for him (23, 24, 26). Jesus prays that those who trust in his name may "see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (24). From all eternity the Trinity has existed in love. God is not as a solitary individual, but as divine community. God is persons-in-relationship.

But the Trinity is more than a close family. The persons of the Trinity share one divine nature. It is a community of *being*. In verse 21 Jesus prays that those who will believe in him will be one "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you". Again in verse 23 he speaks of "you in me". Addressing the Father, he prays that his disciples may be one "even as we are one" (22). Father, Son and Spirit mutually indwell one another. The Father is *in* the Son. The Son is *in* the Father. To see the Son is to see the Father (John 14:9). "I and the Father are one," says Jesus (John 10:30). The three persons inhabit, as it were, one divine being. As we have seen, the Cappadocian Fathers developed what became known the idea of perichoresis to express this. Each person of the Trinity shares the life of the other two so in each person the being of the one God is fully manifested. The eternal God-in-himself is a mutually indwelling, loving community.

2. We are made in the image of the triune community

In Genesis 1 God says: "'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness' ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26-27) Some people have said that we are made in the image of the one God, often then defining that image in terms of our rationality. Others have suggested we are made in the image of the Son since the Bible talks about Christians being remade in Christ's image. But the text suggests we are made in the image of the Trinity. The passage speaks of God as both one and many. "God created man in *his* own image" - the oneness of God. "Let *us* make man in *our* image" - the plurality of God. Being made in God's image seems

to involve ruling over creation under the rule of God. But it also involves sharing God's relationality. We are made for relationships in the image of the one-in-three God. We are made for plurality and unity. "In the image of God he created *him*" - that is our oneness. "Male and female he created *them*" - that is our plurality.

The One and the Many

In the Trinity the one and the many are perfectly integrated. Unity and diversity are perfectly realised. The unity of God does not compromise the diversity of the persons and the diversity of the persons does not compromise the unity of God. And this is how it should be human society. Humanity is modelled on the triune community. The one and the many should be integrated. God is diverse and we, too, are diverse persons with our own individuality. Yet God is also one and we, too, have communal identities. Human society is neither a unified whole in which the community matters more than individuals, nor loosely connected individuals. Neither a collectivist vision of society, nor an individualist vision reflects our true humanity. Trinitarian Christianity offers a way of being human together that integrates unity and diversity. We are people in community without losing our own personal identities.

But this is not how it is. When humanity rebelled against God in Genesis 3, Adam, Eve and the serpent formed a triumvirate-in-conflict, passing the blame to one another. Community is broken. And so in Genesis 4 Cain kills Abel. Human society becomes fractured and fragmented. Ever since we have failed to integrate the one and the many; the communal and the individual.

The many over the one

Sometimes we particularise so that diversity becomes division. We see this in individualism. Biblical Christianity gives dignity to the individual as a person made in the image of God and, argues Vinoth Ramachandra, "most forms of political liberalism derive from the traditional Protestant belief in the inherent dignity of the individual and the consequent right of individual conscience". But, he goes on, "by absolutising the individual it turns into a philosophy of individualism: namely,

the dogma that I can be myself without my neighbour".¹ As Peter Lewis puts it: "the centre of the universe is getting rather crowded".²

At the beginning of the film *About A Boy*,³ the central character, Will Freeman, says:

In my opinion all men are islands. And what's more now's the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago for instance, you had to depend on other people. No-one had TV or CDs or DVDs or videos or home espresso makers. As a matter of fact they didn't have anything cool. Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and, more importantly, the right attitude you can be sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists. And I like to think that perhaps I'm that kind of island. I like to think I'm pretty cool. I like to think I'm Ibiza.

This is the creed of individualism. As the film progress, however, he learns that it is not true. And the film ends with him celebrating Christmas with an associated group of disparate people who form a community in which he finds belonging and identity.

The one over the many

In contrast to individualism, sometimes human societies have universalised so that unity becomes uniformity. We see this in totalitarian regimes where the state restricts personal freedoms and constrains individual expression. For totalitarianism and terrorism individual human beings are expendable in pursuit of the cause - "the many" are entirely subservient to "the one". Institutionalism is the same: it cannot accommodate diversity. The concerns of individuals can be suppressed to protect the organisation or church.

We see it, too, in more subtle imperialisms. We feel lost in a world where each of us must define ourselves for ourselves so ironically the by-product of individualism is often a desire for conformity. We see this in the McDonaldisation of the world - the spread of an homogenous, global culture which destroys or co-opts local cultures. Peter Lewis says: "We are encouraged to express and promote our own self-image, but as everyone else is doing the same it is somehow losing its force, its

¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Paternoster, 1996), p. 22.

² Peter Lewis, *The Message of the Living God* (IVP, 2000), p. 293.

relevance and even its point. We are losing our uniqueness in the very age that affirms our individuality".⁴ Colin Gunton says: "the pressures of modernity are pressures to homogeneity. We might instance the consumer culture with its imposing of social uniformity in the name of choice - a Coca Cola advertisement in every village throughout the world ... Modernity is the realm of paradoxes: an era which has sought freedom, and bred totalitarianism."⁵ This desire for uniformity is at its most sinister when we allow no space for people who are different: whether they be immigrants living in our community or handicapped children who must be aborted.

Person-in-relationship

The key to integrating the one and the many is found in a trinitarian understanding of personhood. Because humanity is made in the image of the Trinity, we become truly human the more we image the Trinity. Personhood in the Trinity is not defined in opposition to others, but through relationship with others. "The persons do not simply enter into relations with one another, but are constituted by one another in the relations."⁶ The Father is the Father because he has a Son and so on. The Father, Son and Spirit are not persons because they operate independently of one another. They are persons in their relationships with one another. Indeed, as we have seen, their personhood is realised in the total interdependency of a perichoretic relationship. God is persons-in-relationship.

Human personality can only be analogous to divine personality. But, made in the image of the Trinity as we are, human personhood is realised through relationships just as divine personhood is. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that relationships are essential for personhood. A "person" is like a "mother" or a "son". It has no meaning apart from relationships with other people. You cannot be a childless mother, a parentless son or a "relationless" person. What defines a mother is the fact that she had children. What defines a person is the fact they have relationships with other people. Colin Gunton talks about "a doctrine of human

³ *About A Boy* (2000), directed by Chris and Paul Weitz with screenplay by Peter Hughes. Based on the novel by Nick Hornby (Penguin, 2000).

⁴ Peter Lewis, *The Message of the Living God*, p. 293.

⁵ Colin Gunton in *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (CUP, 1993), p. 13.

⁶ Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many*, p. 214.

perichoresis" in which "persons mutually constitute each other, make each other what they are".⁷

This is the opposite of individualism. Individualism defines individuality as difference. When asked who we are we often answer in terms of our difference from other people. If I dyed my hair red to be different people might say I was "expressing my individuality". Identity is defined by difference. But true identity is found in relationships. I find my identity as the husband of my wife, the father of my two daughters, a member of a Christian community, a child of God.

This means that when we act in a way to diminish those relationships we dehumanise ourselves. "We need others in order to know who we are and it is from others that we receive our value. When we become a law unto ourselves, when we boast of our self-sufficiency and give ourselves up to a gross and swollen individualism, when we become self-determining, making up our own ethic and stands, careless of what others think of us or expect from us, then it is what we begin to lose ourselves."⁸ If we pursue fulfilment in our career to detriment of our children we do not realise our individuality, we dehumanise ourselves. If I choose to divorce because my marriage is not fulfilling my needs as an individual I dehumanise myself. "This loss of 'independence' [in marriage] is not an impoverishment," says Donald Macleod. "It is an enrichment as we enter upon a life of mutual love and service."⁹ If a society organises itself around individual consumer rights alone or diminishes mutual obligations then it impoverishes its members.

This individualism has its seeds in Augustine's focus on the human mind as that which best reflects the image of God within us. A century after Augustine, the Christian philosopher, Boethius, formed what proved an influential definition of a person as "an individual substance of rational nature". This comes to fruition in René Descartes' declaration that "I think therefore I am". A person is a solitary, rational individual. But if what makes me human is my rationality or my rights or any other supposedly universal characteristic of humanity then it is difficult to say what makes me unique. "If you are real and important ... as the bearer of some

⁷ Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many*, p. 169.

⁸ Peter Lewis, *The Message of the Living God*, p. 294.

⁹ Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity and the Fellowship of God's People* (Christian Focus, 1994), p. 56.

general characteristics, what makes you distinctively you becomes irrelevant.”¹⁰ I am lost in the mass of humanity. But if relationships define my humanity then it is a different story. The matrix of relationships of which I am part are unique to me. The role I play within them defines my distinctiveness. “Everything ... is what it uniquely is by virtue of its relation to everything else.”¹¹ But, because I am defined by relationships, this uniqueness does not lead to a solitary, fragmented existence. We find ourselves by being related to others, not by distancing ourselves from them. We find ourselves in giving and receiving. We are neither wholly the active subject of individualism nor the passive object of collectivism. “The heart of human being and action is a relationality whose dynamic is that of gift and reception.”¹²

When marriages and parenthood are deficient in love and its generous self-expression and self-giving, and when our old, sick, handicapped, poor or disadvantaged are ignored and unhelped, then the life of the triune God is not reflected in our humanity as it should be; then personhood itself is wounded and reduced. Where recognition of others, where kindness, gratitude and care are lacking, the person who has left these behind, however successful in others respects, has shrunk not grown in terms of their true personhood. They are diminished, not greatened, in their self-sufficiency.¹³

3. We are remade in the image of the triune community

As we participate in Christ through faith so we participate in the divine community. John 17:20-26 is hard to read because the pronouns take you by surprise. “I in them and you in ...” says Jesus and we expect him to continue “you in them”, but in fact he says “you in me” (v. 23). In verse 21 Jesus says to the Father: “you are in me and I am in you”. This is the perichoretic life of the Trinity. But in verse 23 Jesus is in the disciples and the Father is in Jesus. Our participation in Christ means participation in the Trinity. We share the trinitarian life. The Father loves us with the same love with which he loves the Son (24). We are part of the family. The Father is our Father. The Son is our brother. The Spirit indwells us.

So the Trinity is to be our *pattern* as we integrate the one and the many. But it is more than a pattern. For Christians it is our life. We *participate* in the trinitarian

¹⁰ Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many*, p. 46.

¹¹ Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many*, p. 173.

¹² Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many*, p. 225.

¹³ Peter Lewis, *The Message of the Living God*, p. 294.

community through the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not simply say, "May they be *like* us". He says: "May they also be *in* us" (21). Paul Fiddes says we should "compliment the *imitation* of God with a thoroughgoing attempt to speak of *participation* in God".¹⁴ The danger of imitation alone is that we lose the mystery of the Trinity and think of it as an image of human community.

We participate in the trinitarian community because we are united to Jesus by the Spirit. Through the Spirit we are in Christ and Christ is in us. This is perhaps the best image of perichoretic life of the Trinity that we can have. To be indwelt by the Spirit does not mean there is a cavity in our hearts glowing with the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit, as it were, shares the same space as us. And through the Spirit Christ dwells in us.

The church is the new humanity being re-made in the image of God. "The manifest inadequacy of the theology of the church," argues Colin Gunton, "derives from the fact that it has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune." Instead we think of the Trinity as "one of the *difficulties* of Christian belief". But, in neglecting it, we fail to appropriate "its rich store of possibilities for nourishing a genuine theology of community".¹⁵ In the church we are striving with the Spirit's help to express the plurality and unity of God; to be the one and the many without compromising either. "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5).

Viewing God primarily as a monarchy of one will tend towards a hierarchical view of the church. But a trinitarian view of the divine persons in perichoretic relationship will tend towards a communitarian view of the church. "The more a church is characterized by a symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and by a freely affirmed interaction, the more it will correspond to the trinitarian communion."¹⁶ Empires all have a tendency towards homogenisation. They impose a common culture and deny difference. But in the "empire" of the Lamb there is unity with diversity. People "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" join together around the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-10).

¹⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (DLT, 2003), p. 29.

¹⁵ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 58-59.

But evangelicalism tends to face the opposite problem with a lack of commitment to Christian community. Perhaps this is because we sometimes operate with a functional tritheism. We reflect the individualism of our age. We conceive of ourselves primarily as many individuals and then project this back onto God, making him in our image as the God who is many at the expense of his unity. We can conceive of Father, Son and Spirit, but not Father, Son and Spirit as one being. And so our churches function as groups of individuals rather than as one interdependent community. We have reduced the idea of being one in the Spirit to not falling out or institutional collaboration. It is a long way from Paul's language of belonging to one another (Romans 12:5). In Philippians 2:2 Paul talks of "being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (ESV). It could be a description of the Trinity, but in fact it is a description of the Christian community. The church is grounded in our participation in the immanent Trinity through the economic Trinity.

The church is the human institution which is called in Christ and the Spirit to reflect or echo on earth the communion that God is eternally. The church is therefore called to be a being of persons-in-relation which receives its character as communion by virtue of its relation to God, and so is enabled to reflect something of that being in the world.¹⁷

In the prayer known as the Grace we talk about "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Corinthians 13:14). It is literally "the participation" or "the communion" of the Spirit. The Spirit creates community. Through the reconciling work of Christ, the Spirit brings us together, making us one body. The true Pentecostal church is a community - a community in which people share their lives and possessions with one another (see Acts 2:42-47). The true charismatic church is a community - a community in which there is unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity. As Paul describes the charismatic gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 his central point is that in the church there is both unity and diversity: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). There is one Spirit, one Lord and one God - a clear trinitarian statement. The same Spirit gives gifts to each of us; we serve the same

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 236.

¹⁷ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 12.

Lord; and the same God works in us. Yet, although there is one Spirit, he gives different types of gifts. Although there is one Lord, there are different ways of serving him. Although there is one God, he works in us in different ways. Our difference is derived from the trinitarian God in grace and offered to the trinitarian God in service. And so, the many gifts are given for one purpose. "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Paul lists a variety of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8-11). God delights in this variety just as each snowflake that he creates is different. At the same time for each gift there is one purpose: the common good. If we miss the need for a variety of gifts we will end up with uniformity. If we miss the need to use gifts for the common good we will end up with division.

Paul develops his argument with the image of a body: there is one body made up of many members. It is crazy to think of a body consisting entirely of hands! But it is also crazy to think of a divided body with its members trying to do opposing things. Bodies are united by their head. In the same way Christians are one body with one purpose united by their head - the Lord Jesus. I need to realise that the body needs me so I need not feel inferior (1 Corinthians 12:15-20). Suppose, says Paul, your foot thought that because it could not do the things a hand can, it was not needed. You would soon fall over! In the same way, your gifts are vital. I also need to realise that I need the body so I cannot feel superior (1 Corinthians 12:21-24). Suppose your eye thought that because only it could see it did not need a hand. You would soon be in trouble. The idea is ludicrous. But it is the same in the body of the church. We need each other. Other people's contributions may not be spectacular, but they are vital. Paul says the weaker parts are in fact indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:24) The Spirit creates community *through* particularity, not by destroying difference. God has brought us together in one body through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are to be a community in which the lowly are honoured and in which we care for one another. Because the many have become one body, we share suffering and honour together (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). Have you ever had a broken leg? It was not just your leg that was incapacitated. Your whole body found it difficult to get around! In the body of Christ the suffering of one person is felt by all. When an athlete wins a race the medal goes round their neck even though it was their legs that did the running. In the body of Christ the joy of one person is felt by all. A friend was telling me once how he wished he had the gifts of other people in the church.

"You're being too individualistic," I replied. I do not know what response he expected from me, but he told me later it certainly was not that response. Instead of envying the gifts of other individuals, I explained, he should rejoice in the gifts of *our* church. In a very real sense, their gifts were his to benefit from.

The Lord's Supper is often called "communion". The word comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16 where Paul asks: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" The wine reminds us that we participate in Christ through faith. But therefore the bread remind us that we participate with one another in the body of Christ. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Yesterday I spoke on the phone to a old friend who is leaving his wife so he can find himself. The doctrine of the Trinity is directly relevant to him. The persons of the Trinity are defined by their relationships. They exist in a perfect community of love - neither absorbed into one nor separate from each other. Human beings, made in the image of the triune God, likewise find their identity in relationship with others. We do not 'find ourselves' by separating ourselves, but in relationship. And so the doctrine of the Trinity speaks to my friend who is leaving his wife. And it speaks to the young student who thinks he can be a Christian without going to church. It speaks to parents who leave their children in nursery all day so they can find fulfilment in their careers. It speaks to the teenage girl who feels trapped by her family. It speaks to the church leader who will not let others take responsibility in the church for fear of losing his authority. It speaks to the family who are only together around the television. It speaks to the young man who will not commit to marriage because he fears losing his freedom.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a stick with which to beat such people. The words it speaks are words of good news - the good news that we can find our humanity in relationship with other people and ultimately in relationship with the relational God.