

“The Holy Trinity in Pastoral Ministry”

By

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What is the place of the Holy Trinity in pastoral ministry? I would like to start with two stories in my ministry: one as a professor and the other as a pastor. Four years ago, I was teaching a class called **Christian Beliefs** at Mount Vernon Nazarene College. It is one of those classes students have to take no matter what their majors are if they want to get their degrees from MVNU. Therefore, you can imagine there were students who did not want to be in the class, but were afraid of the wrath of the Academic Dean and their parents. Therefore, they took the class to get the Dean off their backs. There were others who wanted to know about the Christian faith. As we were discussing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a ministerial student raised his hand and said “Dr. Charles, the Doctrine of Trinity does not work in the real world.” Slowly, I asked him the question, “what is the real world?” He said, “the Real World” is a world of pain, disappointment, uncertainty, confusion, and brokenness.” Furthermore, he said, I have never heard a message on the Trinity, I have been in front of my Church Board for my local preacher’s license, and the District Credentials Board for District license, and they never asked me about the Holy Trinity. I do not think the Trinity is important as you make it sound. I told myself, isn’t that lovely and reassuring.

Two years ago, my family and I moved to Newark, New Jersey to pastor an Inner City Church. A few months after my arrival, I received a frantic and desperate call from a member of the Church who claimed that her brother is hurting and the brother needs God in his life. “Can I bring Him to your office to help him find God”, she said. I said God finds him, not the other way around. Then with an irritating voice she said “are you going to help him or not”? With fear and trembling, I said bring him in. As they were waiting outside of the office, I overheard her telling him you need to have Jesus in your life you cannot continue to live this way. The young man was tired and distraught by his sister's insistence that he needs God or Jesus in his life. He responded with a loud and desperate voice: “Yesterday you told me I need God and the Holy Spirit in my life, today you say I need Jesus in my life. Which one do I really need? Are there three gods or one? I really need to know which one of the gods I need in my life. Perplexed by the question, the sister said you need to know that there is only one God, sometimes He dressed up as a Father, sometimes as a Son, and other time as the Spirit. It is the same thing. We just give God different names. The young man said, God father, Son, and Spirit do not “work in the real world.”

I am afraid that there are more people or pastors in local Churches for whom the first article of faith in the Manual of the Church, “The Holy Trinity, the Triune God” is simply a theological **cliché** of the past with no existential meaning in people’s daily lives. There are those who believe that being a minister of the Gospel and doing ministry in the Church and for the Church have little to do with the Holy Trinity. In other words, the Holy Trinity is irrelevant to holy living and Christian ministry.

We observe in many churches social sciences, new technique of management and marketing replace Scriptures and theological reflection as the guiding principle of ecclesiastical decision and pastoral ministry. Pastors and Christian leaders are pressured to become and behave more like CEOs than ministers of the Gospel. Frankly, in such an environment the Holy Trinity can appear to be irrelevant.

The Holy Trinity is kept in the book and talked about in the classrooms; but has no impact in the life and the ministry of the Church. The Holy Trinity is no longer the foundation of being holy persons, doing holy ministry, in the holy Church. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has become rather a theological perfume sprayed on ecclesiastical corporation to hide the smell of deceptive ways of money grabbing and psychological manipulation.

At a time where Being a minister of the Gospel seems disconnected from Doing Christian ministry, accommodating to novelties is more appealing than theological identity; it is in order to ask ourselves (Church of the Nazarene) what is place of the Holy Trinity in pastoral ministry? Do the persons called to Christian ministry need to believe and understand the whole counsel of God? How does scriptural, theological, and historical understanding of the Holy Trinity affect the pastoral ministry?

The Holy Trinity is fundamental to the Christian Faith. It is the essence of pastoral ministry. For in the Holy Trinity, we understand that “God the Father (creator) engenders the plan of salvation, offering to send the Son by the power of the Spirit. God the Son embodies and executes the atoning, redemptive plan to save humanity. God the Spirit applies the benefits of redemption under conditions of continuing historical development to empower the actual salvation of the faithful.”¹

If indeed we believe in the redemptive work of God that is God the creator came to us in Jesus-Christ the Son with redemption and from the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit convinces, guides, sanctifies, and empowers us to live holy lives, then it seems to me we can say clearly that the Holy Trinity is the theological rationale and the ground for pastoral ministry. A biblical, theological, and historical approach to Christian ministry points us to the Holy Trinity.

Dr. McCormick argues that “if our purpose [as a holy church] is to become by grace what God is by nature then our purpose is to love God as God is love.” I would like to add to that argument that what God is by nature cannot fully be understood outside of the Triune reasoning that is the historical participation in salvation history. If Holiness is the restoration of the Imago Dei (image of God) in the life of the believer, then the people of God cannot claim to be holy or want to be holy unless they understand what the image of God was in us before the Fall, what happened to the image during the Fall, and the divine plan to make redemption and restoration of the image possible for humanity. In other words creation, fall, redemption, sanctification, must be understood in the light of the Triune God. The Holy Trinity must penetrate every aspect of pastoral ministry.

My purpose in this paper is to underline the presence of the Triune God in three aspects of pastoral ministry in the local Church. First, we will argue that the Triune God is the foundation of biblical preaching, second, the Holy Trinity is the center in the Sacraments in the life of the local Church, and finally the Holy Trinity is the source of inspiration in Pastoral Care.

I. The Holy Trinity in the ministry of preaching.

The Good News of the Gospel resides in the work of the Holy Trinity. From cosmology to our eschatology, the pastor cannot explain biblically the history of God's involvement in human affairs and the redemptive plan of God outside of the Triune theological reasoning. Paul made this point clear in his letter to the Church of Ephesus. In Ephesians 1, we read "In Him (Jesus), God has chosen us to be holy and blameless... and in him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding... Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised of the Holy Spirit who is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until redemption of those who are God's possession –to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:3-10).

The Good News of the Gospel is not the Good News exclusively of the God the Father, or of exclusively of Jesus Christ, the Son, or exclusively of the Holy Spirit; rather it is the Good News of the Father, the creator, and the Son, the redeemer, the Spirit the Sanctifier, the guarantor of our salvation. God the father, incarnation of the Son for our justification, and the coming of the Holy Spirit for our sanctification bases the story of salvation on the foundation of creation. So the entire Trinity is engaged in the process of salvation of humanity. Apostle Peter, writing to the early Christians scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Capadocia, Asia, and Bithynia expressed the Triune involvement in the redemption when he said: "To God's elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours." (1 Pet.1-2). Ignoring the Holy Trinity in preaching misses the holistic nature of salvation. For in the Triune relationship, we find the characteristics of holy living.

Contrary to "upward mobility" and financial security that poison the ministry of the Church and inspire some ministers of the Gospel to make decision in the so called "Real World", in the Holy Trinity we find perfect love as the divine motive of redemption. God is love. From that, love flows obedience, harmony, and unity. Contrary to the struggle for power and control, strife, and schism that plague holiness Churches and institutions, in the Triune God we find submission and commitment to each other. The Son is committed to do the will of the Father and the Holy Spirit continues to sustain the redeeming work of the Son and lead God's people in all truth.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus in the "Real World" overwhelmed with pain and sorrow and could have chosen to bail out of his mission, but he said: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken away from me. Yet, not as I will, but as you will." (Matt. 26:39). The incarnate God introducing the ministry of the Holy Spirit said: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give another counselor to be with you forever- the Spirit of

Truth...But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:15-17; 26). Love, obedience, submission, and unity are the characteristics of the Triune relationship. Should not these characteristics be the same for Holy Persons and the Holy Church?

The early Church understood the importance of the Holy Trinity in pastoral ministry and has committed herself to clarify and explain the Triune relationship through coherent exegesis of Scripture. Both the Ante-Nicene and Post Nice Fathers have argued against any attempt to equate The Holy Trinity to pagan **Polytheism, Gnostic dualism**, and Modalistic Monarchianism. In consensus, they affirmed that God is one in Three. The Apostle Creed (Second Century), the Nicene Creed (325 A.D), the Constantinopolitan Creed (385A.D.), the Athanasian (Chalcedonian) Creed (451 A.D.), the Augsburg Confession (A.D.1530), the Westminster Confession of Faith(1647), The Thirty-nine Articles (1562 A.D.), and the Articles of Faith #1 of the Church of the Nazarene are our witnesses that we (the Holy Church) believe in Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. **2**

The Holy Trinity is a firm ground for pastors to proclaim in the real World “the Father’s election (*Patris Elegentis*), the Son’s redemption (*Filii Redimentis*) and the Spirit’s Sanctification(*Spiritus Sanctus sanctificantis*) as a complete plan for redemption of humanity.**3**

The Holy Trinity is foundational not only to biblical preaching in pastoral ministry, but it is the essence of the sacramental life of the Church.

II. The Holy Trinity in the Sacramental life of the Church.

The contemporary Church seems to appease herself with the folly of being relevant to the "Real World" and consequently neglects the primary call of the Holy Church. The primary call of the pastor is not to give commentary on politics, economics, psychology, sociologies, and other miscellaneous information on contemporary fads. Rather, it is a call to proclaim the Good News and re-enact the history of the redeeming work of the Triune God in the sacraments. The New Testament describes quite clearly the mandate of the Church and pastoral ministry in the Christian Communities. In the Gospel of Matthew 28:18-19, we read: “ Then Jesus came to them and said: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The author of the Book of Acts, expressed without ambiguity the early Christian communities beliefs and practice. In the book of Acts we read: “they(the early Christians) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). So teaching, preaching, praying, and administering the sacraments were understood to be a part of the Christian mandate in the real World. The sacraments are the re-enactment of the redemptive work of the Holy

Trinity in history. They are the means of “receiving grace.” They empower the people of God to live holy lives and participate in the ministry of the Church. They remind us of a Holy Trinity working together out of love to save, renew the imago Dei in us, and sustain us to live in the real world. As John Wesley put it, “The sacraments contain the grace which they signify, and confer grace *ex opere operato*(*by the work itself*) upon such as do not put an obstruction.”⁴ The people of God need to know the meaning of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They need and ought to know the meaning of “Do this in remembrance of me.”

The Anti-Sacramental attitude, the theological “*laissez-faire*”, and the blind acceptance of liturgical pragmatism that pervade the life of our local Churches can lead us to the path of theological suicide. I mean by theological suicide, the theological carelessness that becomes the guiding principles of pastoral ministry. This theological *laissez-faire* nurtured by liturgical pragmatism will surely leads us to a crisis of theological identity, especially among the lay people. For many of our pastors, it does not matter what one believes and how one does pastoral work as long as one meets the numerical quotas they convince themselves to believe that the church is healthy and well. Re-traditioning the pastoral office and encouraging pastors to embrace the Holy Trinity as the ground for preaching and administering the sacraments will require a communal commitment at every level of the Church of the Nazarene. Professors, administrators, and pastors must conjugate their effort intentionally to express our position that the preaching word and the sacrament are inseparably intertwined. The word spoken in preaching is visibly enacted in the sacraments.⁵

The Holy Trinity is the ground for pastoral ministry in not only preaching and the sacraments, but it can inspire and affect profoundly the pastoral care that we provide in local Churches.

III. The Holy Trinity and Pastoral Care.

The picture of what a minister is and does in the holiness tradition has been in many ways distorted by the media and contemporary novelties. John Wesley was concerned of the nature of the pastoral office, raised the question, and gave the answer himself. He said: “Who is a Gospel minister in the full, scriptural sense of the word? He, and he alone, of whatever denomination, that does declare the whole counsel of God; that does preach the whole Gospel, even justification and sanctification, preparatory to glory.”⁶ The minister of the Gospel who believes and embraces the Holy Trinity coherently as the source of inspiration of pastoral care, seem to be able to articulate the grace and love of God to the parishioners who are crowded out with the “whys” that have no answers. The pastor will be able to help the people to transform the questions of “why did it happen to me” to “how God is going to help me cross the ocean of pain and disappointment.”

The promises and the faithfulness of God the father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation will help God’s people to face the wounds of the past, the handicap of the present, and the fear of the future with hope. God the father our creator, God the Son our redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier and comforter have worked

faithfully in unity to restore the Imago Dei and made it possible for us “to become by grace what Triune God is by nature.”

What is the place of the Holy Trinity in pastoral ministry in the Real World? The Holy Trinity is the foundation, and the anchor of pastoral ministry in the waves of uncertainties. As Dr. Grider puts: “The Holy Trinity might be thought of as analogous to the air we breathe. As the air is more basic than even food or water, the Holy Trinity, so inclusive, so ramified, is more basic to pastoral ministry than any other Christian doctrine.”⁷

In the Holy Trinity, the pastor sees and understands who we were, who we are, and what we can be because of love, obedience, and submission of the Triune God relationship. Let the Triune God be the Foundation of our preaching and teaching, the center of the sacramental life of the Church, the source of inspiration for pastoral care that we provide to the local Church.

Endnotes

1. Thomas C. Oden: *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology Vol. 3* (New York:Harper Collins, 1992), p.23.
2. K. Steve McCormick: "*Holy God, Holy People: Holy Trinity*", *Reflective Query*, p.8.
3. Charles W. Carter, ed. *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology, Vol.1*, "The Holy Trinity: The Triune God by J. Kenneth Grider, p.391ff.
4. *Creeds of the Churches*, edited by John Leith, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1979, p.315. Quoted by Thomas Oden in *Life in the Spirit* p. 28ff. with a full commentary.
5. *Wesley Works* Vol. X, p. 113.
6. Thomas C. Oden: *Pastoral Theology*, p. 107.
7. J. Kenneth Grider: *The Holy Trinity: The Triune God*, p.404.