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BY
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*“At the centre of Christian faith is the history of Christ.
At the centre of the history of Christ is his passion and his death on the cross.”
~ Jürgen Moltmann¹*

We believe that, during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate, God died on a Roman cross.² We also believe that, the third day thereafter, Jesus of Nazareth – the same person who had been crucified – rose again from the dead. How can these things be? How can the immortal, transcendent, omnipotent One come to a weak, immanent end? How can a dead human leave his grave, living?

At this point, we face a crucial choice: between the posited “God” of metaphysical theism and the revealed God of the Christian faith.³ Should we choose the *former*, our Christ, canon, and confession are irreducibly docetic – the true “God” is aloof, and merely play-acting, at best. Yet, should we choose the *latter*, God is irreducibly, ineluctably Triune – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe, we **trust** that the Triune God is who God has revealed Godself to be.

TRINITY

The narrative of Scripture portrays the Trinity “by telling a history of God with us that displays three enactors of that history, each of which is indeed other than the other two and yet is at the same time the same God as the other two.”⁴ These three *dramatis personae Dei*, or “persons of the divine drama,” appear throughout Scripture as God – “as a *persona* in Israel's story – of which he

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 151.

² Regarding the precise date of the Crucifixion, scholars are divided between AD 30 and 33.

³ On the Crucifixion as theophany, see Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993 [1973]).

⁴ Robert W. Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3-4 (2004): 199. The divinity of the Father is perhaps the easiest to note throughout the Bible. On the divinity of the Son, see John 1, 10; Col. 2; Phil. 2; and Heb. 1. On the divinity of the Spirit, see 1 Cor. 2:11; Heb. 3:7-10; and 10:15-17.

is simultaneously the author.”⁵ YHWH – the God of Israel who created the world and delivered through the Exodus – is the Father by virtue of Jesus' address of him as such.⁶ The Son is Jesus of Nazareth by virtue of this same address.⁷ Finally, the Spirit appears as a *persona* of the story, first in the OT as the Spirit of YHWH which gives life and “keeps the creation moving toward its fulfillment,” and then in the NT as the one in relationship between the Father and the Son, who is poured out upon the Church.⁸

Yes, Jesus of Nazareth prayed to God, calling him Father. Yet this Son of God, confessed by Christians as “very God of very God” (Niceno-Constantinopolitan [Nicene] Creed), also cried out to the Father: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). As Jenson rightly observes: “Therewith it becomes problematic that anything specified by listing ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ can be one God and not rather a mutually betraying pantheon.”⁹ A simple solution to this problem of God’s unity would be to maintain that either just one (Subordinationism) or none (Modalism) of the three identities mentioned is *really* God. However, because the Church trusts Scripture as divine revelation, it believes that it knows the real God, whom it worships – delusion, according to Modalism. Furthermore, the Church worships all three divine Persons – idolatry, according to Subordinationism.

We believe that we can truly know God in revelation, that God can give Godself to be known as an object, because God is first known by Godself – as Subject (Father), Object (Son), and Act of Revelation (Holy Spirit).¹⁰ In order to do justice to worship and the Word of God (or

⁵ Jenson, "The Trinity in the Bible," 198-202.

⁶ Cf. John 5:16-23; Jenson, "The Trinity in the Bible," 199.

⁷ Cf. Ps. 2:7; Heb. 1:1-14.

⁸ Jenson, "The Trinity in the Bible," 199, 204; cf. Gen. 1:2; Ps. 51:11; Isa. 11:2; Ezek. 37:1-14; John 14:15-31; Acts 1:7-8; 2:1-41; Rom. 1:4; 8:11.

⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1997), 65.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [CD], I/1.

better, worship *of* the Word of God: Jesus), the Church confesses “that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit” (Athanasian Creed). One in three, three in one: Father, Son, and Spirit – each Person equally and essentially God, and yet each distinct from the other two.

What about the “mutually betraying pantheon” revealed in Christ’s cry of dereliction? As it turns out, the Spirit preserves God’s unity at the most frayed moment – maintaining the bond of love between the forsaking Father and the forsaken Son, a love so powerful it conquered death.¹¹ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is *raised* from the grave, *revealed* to be who he has always been: the Son of God (Rom. 1:4), and thereby *restored* to the Father. The Trinity is one God, not three, because it is concerned with “a relationship between persons in which these persons constitute themselves in their relationship with each other.”¹² The doctrine of the Trinity holds together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as well as Crucifixion and Resurrection. And yet, we are still faced with the difficulty of the Incarnation: how can the eternal God be so temporal, the transcendent One so immanent?

ELECTION & CREATION

There is no escape from time, not even for God. The Trinity holds together not just Crucifixion and Resurrection, but time itself.¹³ “Eternal” most properly means “without beginning, without end,” and not “timeless,” which means “without past, present, or future.” If we remove “timeless” from our definition of God’s eternity, the Trinity’s identification of itself with its temporal *opera*

¹¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 244.

¹² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 245. This is an apt definition of *perichoresis*.

¹³ “And for this reason, too, we have no need to project anything into eternity, for at this point eternity is time, i.e., the eternal name has become a temporal name, and the divine name a human. [...] [I]n so far as these works are done in time, they rest upon the eternal decision of God by which time is founded and governed” (CD II/2, 98-9). See also Jenson, *Story and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1973), ch. 7.

ad extra poses less of a theological threat (to divine transcendence), beginning with its first external work: election.

Or is it creation? Barth is right to expose the dialectical relationship between the two: “The creation of God, and therefore His positing of a reality distinct from Himself, is the external basis and possibility of the covenant. And the covenant itself is the internal basis and possibility of creation, and therefore of the existence of a reality distinct from God” (CD III/2, 204). The creaturely form and covenant content of the Triune God’s external works find their basis in the election of Jesus as the nexus of God and humanity – Christ is the electing God and the elected human, before the act of creation. That Jesus exists as the elect(ing) God-human before humanity itself exists – that he can precede himself, as it were – is but an illustration of the Triune God’s temporal transcendence, which is not threatened by (but rather displayed through) immanence.

By, for, and to Jesus Christ “the universe is created as a theatre for God’s dealings with man and man’s dealings with God” (CD II/2, 94). Without a fully-orbed view of the Trinity, this extension outward from Godself to that which is not God, from Creator to creature, seems arbitrary. And yet, while God’s freedom can never be reduced to mere necessity, the eternal love which characterizes the life of the Trinity makes God’s free decision to elect and create most fitting.

Through Christ, there is a correspondence between the existence and love of God *ad intra* – between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the existence and love of God *ad extra* to humanity. Humanity only exists within this Christological correspondence, on the basis of a shared sphere with Christ.¹⁴ Therefore, “to be a man is to be with God,” for no matter what else each individual is, “he is on the basis of the fact that he is with Jesus and therefore with God” (CD III/2, 135). The Incarnation grounds anthropology in the Triune God’s address to humanity through Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ “The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus” (CD III/2, 132).

RECONCILIATION

However, the Incarnation also yields the clearest view of sin's absurdity. Although the distinction between Creator and creation entails the *possibility* of creaturely conflict with God, it does not necessitate *actual sin*. Given the Christological and theological basis of human existence, it makes no sense for a human to actualize this possibility, for "if he denies God, he denies himself" and "chooses his own impossibility" (CD III/2, 136). Just as there is no God behind God, there is no humanity beyond the divine summons, beyond existence in the same sphere inhabited by Christ. It is therefore unthinkable that humanity should try to be the source of its own existence, and yet this is precisely that which occurs. Therefore, sin is not merely moral – it is both ontological and incomprehensible: the inherent contradiction of a nothingness which opposes God as the very ground of all existence and reality.

Pardon the cyclical nature of this discussion, but it is time to return to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Why did God the Father forsake? Why was God the Son forsaken? Why did the Spirit need to overcome the divine distancing? The answer to these questions begins with the eternal (before creation, but not timeless) election of Jesus Christ – for he is not just the electing God and elected human, but also the damned human and the damned God. Election is therefore double, in that God elects unto Godself, through Jesus Christ, the incomprehensible nothingness – the terrible "No" – that is the inevitable outworking of human sin. However, God elects unto humanity, through Jesus Christ, the unmerited invitation – the wonderful "Yes" – into the love and life of the Triune God.

An eternal exchange. A "Yes" and a "No." This is all beginning to sound rather *timeless*. And yet, a proper appreciation of the *timeliness* of the Trinity is necessary to make sense of the divine revelation we have actually received, for the Bible contains but an account of the Trinity's

external works in the midst of time – first through the story of Israel, and then through the story of the Church.¹⁵

Between creation and the Incarnation lies the story of Israel, lamentably overlooked in many formulations of the Christian faith.¹⁶ Despite the invasion of sin (Gen. 3) – which ruptured the perfect relationships between God and humanity, humanity and itself, and humanity and the rest of creation (with ontological implications, as mentioned above) – God does not abandon creation to its exile. Neither does God instantaneously fix things. Instead, God takes time.

God calls Abraham and the nation of Israel back to unity with himself through covenant. He endeavors to pull them – and through them as a priestly nation, the world – back from the ruptured relationships into covenantal fellowship and oneness.¹⁷ However, the faithless Israelites repeatedly eschew the loving faithfulness of their God, leading to the exile of the nation.¹⁸

In fulfillment of God’s eternal election, at the incarnation, the Trinity stretches through the Son to meet all humanity – as a Jewish man in the midst of Israel – in its state of partial exile, to fulfill the global mission of Israel.¹⁹ As God enters our midst as Jesus Christ, he pushes us to the side in our perverted attempts to secure our own existence.²⁰ Without succumbing to sin’s siren

¹⁵ Scripture itself seems to glimpse at the tension (but not the rift) between time and eternity in the midst of redemption. Christ, the “Lamb of God that was slaughtered from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8), “was chosen before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for [humanity’s] sake” (1 Pet. 1:20), in order to overcome Sin and Death – God’s cosmic enemies which infected and affected every level of creation at the Fall (Gen. 3).

¹⁶ Although, thankfully, the Old Testament is addressed in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion! Consider the beginning of Article VII (Of the Old Testament): “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises.”

¹⁷ See foundational covenant passages, such as Gen. 12, 15, throughout the Old Testament.

¹⁸ Consider, for example, the curses for covenantal unfaithfulness found in Deut. 27:14-26; 28:15-68, culminating with the threat of exile.

¹⁹ As Irenaeus and Athanasius proclaimed: “God became what we are so that we might become what He is.”

²⁰ In Barth’s words, “because our evil case otherwise meant our inevitable destruction, God willed to make it His own in Jesus Christ. What we are He Himself willed to become, in order to take and transform it from within, to make of it something new, the being of man reconciled with Himself” (CD IV/1, 242).

call, he is fully affected by it, bringing sinful human nature into the life of God and thereby intensifying the divine reaction against it into an ultimate tension.²¹ The one ultimately worthy *to* exile is now also the one ultimately worthy *of* exile.

Once more, to the cross. There, the Trinity stretches to the utmost, as the Son of God, worthy to mete out the sentence of exile, instead *goes into exile* – into the far country of the grave – bearing the consequences of sin for the sake of humanity’s salvation.²² At the death of Christ, the Trinity has stretched to its limit, and yet humanity is left in a state of partial exile as before.

However, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the exiled Son of God is vindicated as the Savior of the world and brought back from the far country of death. Through this movement of the Son into the utmost exile and back again, sin itself is offered up to destruction.²³ And crucially, all humanity who is united to him by grace through faith – everyone who is therefore *in Christ* – gets caught up with the Son in his return to the life and love of the Triune God.²⁴

CHURCH

And yet, getting caught up with Christ in this return to Triune fellowship does not take place timelessly or instantaneously. It is, rather, an *already, not-yet* phenomenon. Between the Resurrection and the present moment lies the ongoing (for about two millennia, now) story of the Church. And while all Christians confess some sort of belief in the future return of Jesus to set things right, to “judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed), it is a particular (though not unique) strength of Anglicanism that it endeavors to take seriously both the timeliness and

²¹ According to Barth, “in the place of all men [Christ] has himself wrestled with that which separates them from him. He has himself borne the consequence of this separation to bear it away “(CD IV/1, 237-8).

²² CD IV/1, 247.

²³ “In the suffering and death of Jesus Christ it has come to pass that in his own person he has made an end of us as sinners and therefore of sin itself by going to death as the One who took our place as sinners. In his person he has delivered up us sinners and sin itself to destruction” (CD IV/1, 253).

²⁴ Cf. 1 Cor 15:20-22. As the nexus of redemption and re-creation, the resurrection is crucial – for the focus of the atonement is not merely to sentence sin with its proper exile, but to fulfill God’s creative purposes for unity and participation in the divine life.

diversity of the Trinity's external work throughout the Church's history. Specifically, since the Holy Spirit has been faithful to sustain the Church and supply it with leaders and teachers throughout its existence as a community "in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments," timely works of the Trinity, if you will, "be duly ministered" (Articles of Religion, 19), Anglicans feel free to draw upon the diverse breadth of thought throughout the history of Christ's Body. For example, I do not expect to be reprimanded for drawing heavily upon Barth, Moltmann, and Jenson (non-Anglicans, all) throughout this paper.²⁵

On one hand, Anglicans believe that "[i]t is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers[e], and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word" (Articles of Religion, 34). Church history is not homogeneous, nor is it infallible. And yet, on the other hand, Anglicans are convinced that it is not *necessary* to jettison the great tradition(s) of the Church in order to achieve reform. Usually, one should only dispense with Church traditions that appear directly to contradict God's Word:

"Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like,) as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church..." (Articles of Religion, 34).

The history of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" (Nicene Creed) Church, despite its frequent descent into divided, profane, sectarian innovation, has great value. Because it is a part of the history of the temporally-eternal, transcendently-immanent, Triune God – because it matters to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the life and history of the Church ought to matter to all who call themselves Christians, Anglicans or not.

²⁵ Although, I *may* be reprimanded for giving the Sacraments such short shrift. I only have eight pages!