

"Undivided Energies: Encountering the Trinity in Thought, Prayer, and Praise."

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Though most Christians agree that the doctrine of the Trinity is central to Christian faith, it is often reduced to a puzzle and treated as a formula. Why is the doctrine important, and how can we know that "these three are one" as a dynamic, living, reality?

I am honored, and I rejoice, to be the first holder of the John and Miriam Conant Chair in Worship at Columbia Theological Seminary.

When my daughter Hilary heard that I had been called to this chair in worship, she sent a congratulations card, saying that she was proud her Dad was going to be a professor.

On the front of the card is a drawing of a mountaintop. The caption reads, "Congratulations! You made it!"

On top of the mountain is a colorfully dressed, overjoyed and delighted . . . DUCK!

The picture poses difficult questions.

What is a duck doing on top of a mountain?

Do I, perhaps, resemble this duck?

How did this web-footed creature climb the mountain?

And what will it do now it is at the summit? The mountaintop has no water. The nearest lake is a long way down. Clearly, the duck is out of its element. Do I, perhaps, resemble this duck? Suppose that those who called it to the mountaintop are under the misapprehension that the creature can sing. How will they react when all it does is quack?

From these disturbingly difficult questions I turn, with quite misplaced relief, to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The title of my address is, "Undivided Energies: Encountering the Trinity in Thought, Prayer, and Praise." My choice of theme honors Trinity Presbyterian Church Atlanta, which endowed the John and Miriam Conant Professorship, and made possible my presence here tonight.

Central Yet Marginal

A funny thing happened to the doctrine of the Trinity on the way to the 21st century. For about four hundred years, it was a developing, radically new understanding of God.

Then, in succeeding centuries, it became more and more abstruse and abstract: important, but less and less connected to piety, liturgy, and life.

From the middle of the twentieth century, however, this neglected doctrine has become more and more important—at least among theologians.

The doctrine of the Trinity has become a focus of encounter between Eastern and Western theology; a focus of conflict between white, male, western theology and its feminist, womanist, mujerista, Asian, African, African-American and Latin American critics; and a focus of theological exploration worldwide—least, among theologians.

Amid all the controversies, there is wide agreement that to speak of the Trinity does not mean adding another topic to our understanding of Creation, Redemption, Sin, Salvation, and Eschatology. In the words of one scholar, “Trinity discourse relates to the shape and structure of the whole framework of Christian doctrine and therefore cannot be presented as one doctrine within that framework.”ⁱ

Trinitarian doctrine, then, is central to the meaning of Christian faith. However, the energetic explorations of theologians have as yet had little effect on the way churches work, witness, organize their polities, worship, think, and speak about God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is still, I think, widely perceived as unnecessary, unintelligible, and unrelated to the practice of Christian faith. At an abstract level it may well be true, but at the day-to-day level, it is nonfunctional. It is central to the meaning of Christian faith, but marginal to its practice.

In the Liturgical Year, the Trinity gets one Sunday, at the beginning of the holiday season, followed by weeks of Ordinary Time. For most congregations, celebrating the One in Three means, at most, one Sunday, one sermon, and one doxology.

I believe that the doctrine of the Trinity has practical consequences for Christian living. To make my case, I must summarize why it matters. Then, because worship is my particular interest, I shall try to show how Trinitarian faith might affect the practice of public worship, especially Reformed worship. Because we are speaking of the Trinity, along the way we shall praise that of which we speak.

“Never distant or alone”

Imagine a spaceship from Earth approaching a newly discovered planet. As it draws closer, and goes into orbit, its crew are excited to find that their scanners are picking up a vast array of data showing that the planet teems with sentient, intelligent life.

Descending to the planet’s surface, they find oceans and continents, and colorful shapes that grow and change with passing day. There are three-dimensional mathematical equations, and what look like art works of great beauty, but no sign of the species their scanners have detected. Yet strange events occur. They sleep, and wake to find rock formations in replicas of themselves, and fragments of bridges, highways, and buildings, in a parody of their memories of home.

Eventually, back on board ship, they stumble on the truth. All the signals of intelligence and creativity are coming, not from members of intelligent species, but from the planet itself. Somehow, over eons of time, the entire planet has become a sentient being.

In a nutshell, this is the plot of Stanislaw Lem’s novel, *Solaris*.

Imagine a mind whose neurons form a web spanning seas and continents. Its intelligence is astounding. Its creativity is immense.

But something is missing.

Over many earth days and weeks, the spaceship crew tries to communicate with this unique, planetary, mind, this “Solaris.” They send mathematical formulae on radio waves of all frequencies. They build molecular structures on the surface. They use laser beams, electromagnetic pulses, and a hundred other methods of communication.

Nothing succeeds. The planet is simply not aware of them. It has never known anything other than itself. It cannot recognize another form of intelligent life.

Compared with any human being, Solaris is a godlike intelligence. Within itself, on its surface, it creates shapes and forms of beauty and complexity. But it is an enclosed, and isolated being. It has never known anything like itself, or anything other than itself. So it cogitates and ponders and creates, within itself. It knows no other. It can conceive of no other. It needs no other. It will never know that we exist.

If I may use Stanislaw Lem’s story as a negative parable, several of the world’s religious faiths have always known that God is not Solaris. Christians, Jews, and Moslems do not worship a Solarian God, even though some Christian thinking gets dangerously close to such a conception.

For all the differences between Muslim, Christian and Jew, our common experience of the Divine is that God creates beyond God's own interiority, that God wishes to have a relationship with creation, and that God creates sentient, self-aware beings who can be in a relationship with God and who, themselves, on a smaller scale, can create.

Primal Experience

Trinitarian theology is the Christian map of that awareness. It springs, not from speculation, but from history. As devout Jews, the first followers of Jesus–Messiah knew and passionately believed that God is Holy, Unique and One. No other gods must be allowed to get in the way of the One. All other objects of worship are idols. Jews could not compromise on this primary article of faith (Deuteronomy 6:4). Many were prepared to die for it, and did.

Yet from very early on, the followers of Jesus–Messiah had three experiences of the One. Christian Scripture (the New Testament) has many examples of this threefold pattern (See Matthew 10:16-19, 12:15-21 and 28:16-19; Mark 1:9-13; Luke 4:16-21 and 10:21-22; John 20:19b-22; Acts 1:6-8, 2:22-24, 32-33, 37-39; 7:54-56; 10:34-43; 10:44-48; 20:22-28; Romans 5:1-8, 8:14-17, 26-27 and 15:14-19, 33; 1 Corinthians. 12:1-3 and 13:11-13; Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians. 3:14-19 and 4:1-5; 2 Thessalonians. 2:13-14; Titus 3:4-8; Hebrews 9:11-14; 1Peter 1:1-2; and 1 John 4:13-16).

For many, perhaps, the first distinct experience was of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Risen Christ: in baptism, ecstatic worship, barrier-breaking experiences of community, and the discovery of unexpected gifts. The Spirit of the Living God, who in the past came only on leaders and prophets, was now being poured out on all flesh: old and young, women and men, free people and slaves.

Closely associated with the experience of the Spirit, yet distinct from it, was the collective memory of Jesus of Nazareth, who had announced God's new world order, demonstrated it in his life, trusted God through betrayal and crucifixion to the point of death, had been raised from the dead, and is alive among his disciples.

And all this came from the original experience of God, the God of Israel, who had freed Pharaoh's slaves, kept covenant with the chosen people, defended the outcast and oppressed, and created the universe simply by speaking a word

“I bow my knees before the Father,” says the writer of Ephesians. “I pray that . . . you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” (Ephesians 3:14-19)

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” says the risen Christ to the disciples. “When he had said this he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21-22)

At Pentecost, Peter proclaims the message: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.” (Acts 2:32-23).

And Paul says to the Christians in Corinth: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor 13:14).”

The biblical record does not explore how the three experiences of divinity are related. But when Christians began to think about them, obvious questions arose. Is one in authority over another? Is one lesser and another greater? Is one truly God, and the others, as it were, secondary expressions of God?

Such questions matter to us. Not only because we thirst to know God, and to know the truth about God. But because the way God is, is the way we are called to be and become. To take one example, if God has an internal monarchy, then perhaps our churches and societies ought to be hierarchically organized, to reflect the nature of God.

Founding Metaphors

From early times, Trinitarian thinking focused around three ‘labels,’ two of which are linguistically inseparable (‘Father’ and ‘Son’) plus a third, different label, ‘Holy Spirit.’ We can summarize the discoveries of early Trinitarian thought if we look briefly at the labels that received most attention: ‘father’ and ‘son.’ I use the word ‘label’ because, as Gail Ramshaw puts it, “Early theologians speak as if Father, Son, and Holy spirit are labels rather than images, claiming that God comes with the biblical name Father. . . . not that God acts like a father.”ⁱⁱ

Ramshaw’s point is important, but needs to be qualified. Though the best early thinkers knew what some later theologians forgot, that God as ‘father’ is beyond gender, not a male or masculine deity who vindicates patriarchal authority, when these same thinkers use the words ‘father’ and ‘son’ they unavoidably do so with reference, even if only a negative reference, to their common social meanings.

Thus, a linguist who looks at these words will describe them as metaphor. By metaphor I do not mean ornamental speech that can be discarded, or pictorial illustrations to help the ignorant. I mean by ‘metaphor’ a precise and particular kind of language, not disposable, and not easily exchangeable, that appeals to both intellect and imagination, and can sometimes gain knowledge not otherwise obtainable.

Whatever you may think of its revelatory status, the metaphor of ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ is drawn partly from ancient Mediterranean society, where a good son is one who learns his father’s trade, and does his father’s bidding. We find that thought echoed in Trinitarian discussions of the Father and the Son.

Another important source for early Trinitarian thinking was biological. Because Aristotelian biology erroneously believed that the entire being of a child was contained in the father’s sperm, the woman’s womb being only its incubator, it could be said that a father was biologically the sole and only origin of his offspring. This is the meaning of words like “beget,” “begat,” and “begotten” in older English translations of the Bible.

Since a father was believed to be the sole origin of his children, the word ‘Father’ could also mean, in a more abstract sense, ‘origin.’ We find that thought echoed in Trinitarian discussions of God as creator, and of the Father and the Son.

Finally, the words ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ in Christian thinking reflect the New Testament title of Jesus Christ as “Son of God,” and the character of God whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In the gospel record we meet a Father whose first word to and about Jesus is, “this is my beloved Son”; who sends Jesus to announce that God is reaching out to the whole people of Israel with generous, forgiving love, and in whose name Jesus says and shows that God does not stand on ceremony or defend divine dignity, but reaches out to seek and save human beings who have gone, or been pushed, beyond the bounds of purity and righteousness. We find those thoughts also echoed in Trinitarian discussions of the Father and the Son.

Achievements

In thinking about the primal Christian experiences of God, the value of the “Father- Son” metaphor is that it portrays an intimate relationship in which there was unity of purpose. This made it possible to imagine both distinction and oneness in God. As controversy followed controversy, the metaphor was radically reinterpreted. For example:

- Unlike human relationships of parent and child, this ‘Father’ is not older than this ‘Son’: they have always been what they are, and always will be: they are “co-eternal.”

- Unlike human relationships, where parent and child are genetically connected but have different personalities and different bodies, this ‘Father and Son’ are one God: they share the ‘stuff’ or substance of divinity: they are “con-substantial.”
- Unlike human relationships between parents and young children, this ‘Father’ does not rule over this ‘Son’ (because God cannot rule over God); and unlike ancient patriarchal relationships, where the son has no standing till he comes of age, the relationship between this ‘Father’ and this ‘Son’ is not a relationship of greater to lesser: they are “co-equal.”
- Finally, because God is beyond human gender, the relationship between this ‘Father’ and this ‘Son’ is not male or sexual. A paradoxical expression of this insight comes from the year 675, at the Council of Toledo, where it was said that the “Father” both ‘begets’ and ‘gives birth to’ the “Son” *de utero patris* (“out of the Father’s womb”).

Implications

Why does this matter to Christian faith today?

First of all, if the Living God who created all things has reached out to human beings in three distinct yet inseparably interrelated ways, then, because God never deceives us but reveals to us who God truly is, it follows that the distinctions, the oneness, and the relatedness revealed to us are showing us something truthful about distinction, oneness, and relatedness in God.

To put it in the jargon of Trinitarian doctrine, the economic (or outgoing) Trinity gives us a truthful glimpse - a glimpse surely, but a truthful glimpse - of the immanent (or interior) Trinity.

Secondly, what God shows us about God has a bearing on how we are meant to behave with each other.

Putting these principles together, here is something of what the doctrine of the Trinity shows us:

1. God is reaching out to creation, and to humankind, in three distinct ways, so distinct that they can never be collapsed into singleness, and so unified that they can never be split up into separateness.
2. God is not a mon-ad (a ‘Solarian’ being in splendid isolation). Instead, God knows what we call “otherness” within God’s own self, as well as in God’s creation. God’s being is what we know as ‘relationship.’ Relationality is within God, as well as in God’s outreaching and outflowing love.

3. God is not a mon-arch (one who rules alone), nor is there an internal monarchy or hierarchy within God. The relationship between the three partners, or persons, or ways of being, is not one of commanding and obeying but of order without subordination, in dynamic communion, eternal agreement, and mutual love. **It immediately follows that visual and verbal images of God as an all-commanding male ruler are out of step with Trinitarian faith, and idolatrous if presented as the normative image of God.**

4. God is not a society. The relationality, dynamic communion, and outreaching love of the Holy Trinity are closer than any relationship between human beings can ever be. These Three are One as they draw life from one another, share life with one another, and exist in one another, in a relationship of permeation without confusion.

Metaphorically, the communion of the Three is aptly described as a cooperative, moving, flowing, dance - provided we understand that the dance is open, not closed, and that all humankind, and all creation, are invited to join in.ⁱⁱⁱ

If these are truthful and important discoveries, as I believe they are, one appropriate response is thanksgiving and praise.

One of the earliest ways that Reformed Christians did this was in the words of an outburst of praise - a doxology ("Praise God, from whom all blessings flow" - in the USA often quaintly known as THE doxology) that is printed below -

"Praise God!" The whole creation sings.

Praise God on earth, all living things.

Praise God, in Jesus fully known:

Praise Author, Word, and Spirit One.

Shaping Trinitarian Worship

Last fall, a member of my Worship class visited a Presbyterian church in a city not far from Atlanta. "There was definitely a Trinitarian approach to this service," she writes. "The different names for the persons of the Trinity were sprinkled throughout the service in the spoken liturgy and in the musical selections. During the pastoral prayer, the typical formula of praying to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ was used." However, "There were more symbols relating to Jesus, such as the communion table and the cross, than any of the other persons of the trinity."^{iv}

Obviously, making worship Trinitarian is more than a matter of words. Sprinkling Trinitarian titles through the service is a start, but insufficient if worship is not, at a deeper level, the worship of the Three who are One.

Issues Briefly Noted

In the time available I can pay only minimal attention to some important elements of worship.

On preaching, let me simply state my conviction that Trinitarian preaching springs, not from intellectual assent to the doctrine, but from a faith and prayer life that are at the deepest level, Trinitarian: in conviction as well as concept, intuitively as well as intellectually, spontaneously as well as intentionally.

As regards Baptism, I am not convinced by the ecumenical weight loaded on to the phrase, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” either as a test of the validity of Christian baptism or as an adequate way of baptizing in the name of the Trinity. Part of my concern has to do with the language issues I shall speak about in a moment. Partly, also, to quote two recent writers, “compact formulae are not always the best way to express Trinitarian praise. Constantly using the same short phrase reinforces the idea that the Trinity is a logical puzzle or a mathematical formula, not a loving and multifaceted reality to which we witness.”^v

As regards the Eucharist or Holy Communion, the whole service ought powerfully to show, not merely our communion with Christ, but the divine communion that makes our communion possible. Within the service, the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving is an opportunity to honor the distinctiveness of the Three, and meet the manifold oneness of the One. If I had time tonight, I would ask whether the custom of having the prayer spoken by one, and only one voice, is adequately Trinitarian.

If I had time to look more closely at creeds, I would agree with Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner that, “creeds that best serve worship are testimonies: they seek to express the faith of the churches in a concise yet comprehensive way, in a mode of thanksgiving and praise.”^{vi} I would ask what purpose is served by the frequent repetition of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, especially in churches where contemporary expressions of faith are few and far between.

I would try to show that, though the occasional use of ancient creeds may connect us, at least poetically, with the communion of saints, it is doubtful whether they can express today's Trinitarian faith "in a concise yet comprehensive way."

Finally, if time allowed, I would worry considerably about the Trinitarian lopsidedness of the liturgical year. If we allow the liturgical year to shape Trinitarian worship, we find ourselves attending quite adequately to the Source and Origin of all things, and the wonders of creation, between September and November, when a high proportion of worshippers are in church; then giving high-energy attention to the Second Partner from Advent through to Ascensiontide with Christmas and Easter as the highest points of the year; then relegating the Spirit to a rush of Pentecostal wind followed by months of "ordinary time," much of which in the northern hemisphere is vacation time. I would suggest:

- That in fully Trinitarian worship, we meet all three Trinitarian partners all year round, in prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and song - and of course in preaching;
- That Trinitarian worship, all year round, tries to speak, pray, sing about and visualize the Trinity in a way that expresses the co-equality of the Three, and leaves no room for the notion that one is more important than another;
- That Trinitarian worship, all year round, tries to speak, pray, sing about and visualize the Trinity in a way that expresses the complete, joyful, loving unity of the Three who are One, and that the richness of Trinitarian relationships calls for a faith deeper and richer than "just me and Jesus."

And I would suggest that Trinitarian worship, all year round, tries to do justice to the distinctiveness of each "partner" in the Three who are One. For example, though Trinitarian faith holds that the Eternal Word and the Living Spirit were intimately present with the Origin of All who met Moses on the mountaintop, Trinitarian faith, all year round, will highlight, sing about, and give thanks for God's covenantal story with ancient Israel, and with believing Judaism today.

I have time tonight, hopefully to focus on two issues: Trinitarian worship speech, and our need to know and trust the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Trinity Talk

One unavoidable issue is the language we use to speak to, and about God as Trinity. On this controversial issue there is a wide range of opinion. From one end of the spectrum come arguments that the traditional language is hopelessly patriarchal, serves the powers of

domination, and must therefore be dismantled and replaced. From the other end of the spectrum come claims that traditional terminology, especially “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” is mandatory, irreplaceable, and hegemonic: mandatory, meaning that God insists we speak in these terms, which thus become irreplaceable; and hegemonic, meaning that the traditional language overrules all other forms of Trinitarian speech.

It would take a semester to unravel these issues. I shall look at them tonight with the aid of two distinctions: between intent and effect, and between the doctrinal and devotional modes of theological speech.

Intent and Effect

In any attempt at communication, what is actually communicated from one person to another depends partly on what the sender intends to say, and partly also on what the hearer hears. Intent and effect may, or may not, coincide.

For theologians who uphold the traditional terminology, their main emphasis is usually on what they intend it to communicate. Though a minority intends to communicate a view of the divine as in some sense masculine, most do not. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Ted Peters, Leonardo Boff, and Colin Gunton use “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” fully intending to convey the relationality, order without subordination, dynamic communion, and outflowing love that Trinitarian theology has discovered as it relentlessly reinterpreted these terms. From the ‘traditional’ end of the spectrum, the argument tends to be something like this: These are the terms that have come down to us; it is better to reinterpret than replace them; and in any case, you can’t substitute one metaphor for another - to do so is a change of theology, not merely of terminology.

There is some weight to this view, especially the point that metaphors are not easily changed; if you take an unwanted metaphor back to the theology store, and ask for a new one, you’ll get a replacement that does something different.

At the other end of the spectrum, people who question traditional Trinitarian terminology do so partly because they believe that, whatever the intent, its effects have become irreversibly problematic. As a linguist, I give weight to the effects of linguistic communication, because overwhelmingly, usage determines meaning. Speaking of God’s compassion in the mid-eighteenth century, Charles Wesley wrote, “To me, to all, thy bowels move.” Nowadays, you can explain to a congregation that “bowels” really means “compassion,” or you can change the line (as hymnals have long since done) to something like, “to me, to all, thy mercies move.” The way

people use the word “bowels” has changed so much that it is irreversibly (and laughably) misleading to go on using it.^{vii}

Doctrine and Devotion

One good reason for changing Wesley’s words is that they are written for the devotional mode of theological discourse, not the doctrinal mode. In the doctrinal mode, our purpose is thought and reflection. We try to stand back from our subject matter, and even from the language we are using, so that we can think about it, and question it. The doctrinal mode is perfectly suited for the lecture hall, the classroom, the symposium, the careful reading of a book, the critical viewing of a movie, and some aspects of hearing a sermon. In the doctrinal mode, we can achieve some degree of detachment even from the words we are using, to the extent of redefining them away from popular, everyday meanings.

In the devotional mode, however, our purpose is not detachment, but commitment – not reflection, but immersion. The language of prayer, praise, petition, lament, and thanksgiving is a vehicle for a hoped-for encounter with the Holy. The logic of the devotional mode is not to stand back but to plunge in. What counts in the devotional mode is not the theologian’s intent, but the meaning his or her words immediately and commonly convey.

Thus, when we use “Father-Son” God-talk in the devotional mode, there is minimal room for redefinition. In worship, the qualifications and explanations of theologians have limited effect, because what counts are a metaphor’s immediate impact and common-speech meanings and associations.

Problems Compounded

The problem of Father-Son terminology in the devotional mode is compounded by the male-centered use that theologians, church authorities, and artists have persistently made of it. In theology, “God as Father” language has frequently been used, not with the carefulness of early Trinitarian thought, but to present an image of God as analogous to a male authority figure.

Thus, Martin Luther wrote that God the Father is the model of all father figures. Karl Barth spoke movingly of God as the merciful Father. The social gospel movement talked about the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. In worship, writes Gail Ramshaw, “the faithful have sought to be connected to God, and the names of God recurring in the church’s prayer life provide this primary connection. Father came to mean not Abba, not resistance to emperor worship, not the philosophical Unoriginate Origin, not the key to Christology, but a personalized masculine authority figure.”^{viii}

Moreover, God-as-Father language cannot be confined to what goes in churches or seminaries. It has cultural ramifications. “The use of predominantly masculine language (for God) is one significant way in which patriarchal culture is passed from one generation to another. Using many masculine images and no feminine images for God sends the message that women are not made in the image of God and thus are less valuable than men.”^{ix}

Religious art has had an equally powerful impact. By repeatedly picturing the Trinity as “an old man, a young man, and a third thing” (Ramshaw) artists have filled the imagination of generations of worshippers, sermons, and Sunday School lessons, with the indelible misconceptions that “God the Father” is like an old man; that the man Jesus embodies a male, or male-like divinity; and that the technical phrase, “three Persons,” implies that God is three separate, and male, beings. Hollywood movies follow suit, whether God is the cute old man played by George Burns in *Oh God*,² or the deep male voice that thunders from mountaintops and storm clouds.

Against this background, the repeated use in worship of the traditional Trinitarian formula may have effects not foreseen by theologians. For example, if we say over and over again, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” and never speak of the Three in a different sequence, we are embedding in our imagination a sequence that suggests - because “Father” always comes first - that God the Father is more important than God the Son - in technical language a mon-archy of the First Person of the Trinity.

Or, at the very least, we are inviting worshippers to meet the mystery of God as an all-male one-parent family with either a resident phantom (if we say Ghost) or a sip of Bourbon (if we say Spirit).

To make one final comparison, in the doctrinal mode we can take terms like Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and translate them into non-gendered, non-hierarchical speech. In language of praise and devotion, it is only partially possible to “translate”, and continuous translation is unworkable and un-worshipful, for example:

“*Our Father* [but by this we mean not a male parent figure, whether abusing or caring, authoritarian or egalitarian, but God beyond sexuality, beyond male and female, beyond masculine and feminine, infinitely gracious and utterly reliable, who has mysteriously decided that a name associated with male patriarchal authority is the only name that he - but of course we don’t mean “he” - will permit us to use about him - but of course we don’t mean “him”], *who art*

in heaven. (Hmm, how shall we translate Heaven?). *In the Name of the Father* [pause for translation], *and of the Son* [pause for explanation] *and of the Holy Spirit* [pause for confusion], *Amen.*”

I do not wish, in today’s worship, to erase traditional Trinitarian language, but to end its monarchic rule by placing it in a constellation of varied Trinitarian speech in prayer and praise. Some of my own explorations are embedded below.

Whatever language we use - including the language of Spirit, Father, and Son - we use it hoping to encounter divine mystery.^x

The Trinity is a mystery, not a secret. Secrets puzzle us, but lose their fascination as soon as they are revealed. A mystery deepens the more it is pondered and known. The mystery of human personality is a good example: the better we know someone we love, the more we wonder at the mystery of who and what they are. So it is with the mystery of God. ^{xi}

Here is a poem of mine, “The Song of Three Children.” I hope that it may bring us in touch with the mystery of God:

I met three children in the street.
 They did not give me trick or treat
 but whispered, laughed, and called my name.
 I nearly walked away,
 but something made me stay
 and join them in their game.

“Now let’s pretend that we are God,”
 they said, and ran to where I stood.
 They danced around me in a ring
 and sang, “You must agree
 to give us questions three,
 so ask us anything.”

They waited, sitting on the ground,
 and did not move or make a sound.
 I thought and puzzled long that day,
 and then, to my surprise,

I looked into their eyes,
and knew what I would say:

“Now listen to my questions three,”
I said,”and you must answer me:
What is your name, and Are you real,
and Can you see and know
how humans think and grow,
and fathom how we feel?”

The first child stood up tall,
and suddenly I felt quite small
as solemnly she said:
“We never give our name away,
but listen hard to what I say:

God is not a She, God is not a He,
God is not an It or a Maybe.
God is a moving, loving,
knowing, growing Mystery.”

The second child moved so fast
I hardly saw her spinning past
as all around she sang:
“I’ll dance my dance of destiny
till you are all as real as me:
I made you.I know you. I love you.”

The third child took my hand
and whispered, “Yes, we understand.
I know what children think and do,
for I have been a child like you.

I know how it feels to walk and run,
 to sing and shout, and play in the sun,
 or cry in the night, or fall to the ground,
 or tremble with fright, or be lost and found.
 I know how it feels to look at the sky
 and keep on asking why and why.”

I met three children on my way,
 and never knew, in all our play,
 their age or name or why they came,
 yet all the world is new,
 and everything I do
 will never be the same.

God is not a She, God is not a He,
 God is not an It or a Maybe.
 God is a moving, loving,
 knowing, growing Mystery.”

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Reformed Strength and Weakness

If I were asked to pinpoint some of the strengths of Reformed worship today, I would point to the value we place on thoughtful, committed, impassioned preaching that digs deep into tradition, experience, and the biblical text; to our emphasis, at best, on offering people space to explore Christian faith and make a mature decision about it; and our ability, at best, to trust the grace of God and be ever suspicious of our own motivations and the machinations of the powers that be.

If I were asked to pinpoint weaknesses in Reformed worship, I would say that, though our theology is formally Trinitarian, we have a radically defective practical theology of the Third

Person of the Trinity, such that we do not know how to allow for and trust the power of the Holy Spirit in our worship - and perhaps elsewhere.

I hear, on the grapevine, that one of my faculty colleagues speaks with gentle irony about what he calls the “Presbyterian Pentecost.”

Presbyterian Pentecost is not the unseemly disorder described in the Acts of the Apostles, with tongues of fire, the appearance of intoxication, ecstatic utterance, and a rushing mighty wind.

Presbyterian Pentecost comes in the Gospel of John, where Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Not a gale, not a breeze, not a wind, but a breath: Just enough Spirit to feel a gentle movement of air on your face; nowhere near enough to blow you along, or sweep you off your feet. Obviously, when Jesus did not blow upon his disciples, but gently breathed on them, he was anticipating Paul’s instruction to do all things decently and in order.

There is humor, but also sadness, in that picture. Reformed worship desperately needs an infusion of Spirit.

Embodiment

First, our worship needs to be more embodied. Paradoxically, when the Spirit is present, the body moves, and is moved. And when the body moves, we more readily know the Spirit’s power and presence.

I do not mean by this that all Reformed congregations must immediately dance down the road and join the hand-clapping, body swaying, enthusiastic singing of the nearest Pentecostal church - though I would have nothing against that if their theology remained Reformed: Reformed theology and Pentecostal enthusiasm would be a powerful combination. And at the very least, it would be wonderful if Reformed congregations could give themselves permission to move when they sing, and learn to clap on the correct beat, or off-beat.

Whether or not we go as far as that, I am convinced that, in order more fully to know the presence of the Spirit, we must do more with our bodies than park them in the pew. The passing of the peace in some Reformed congregations seems to take longer than it once did: perhaps because, without verbalizing it, many of us are glad of the opportunity to get up, move, and meet people.

This is not the place to give a recipe for movement, or a list of actions that make worship embodied. I simply suggest that when planning worship, we ask, “What will the congregation be

invited to do, physically, today?” Or, what movement - in dance, drama, dramatized scripture reading, or choral singing - will communicate something of the gospel bodily and nonverbally, to the whole congregation? Will we, perhaps, stand, face each other across the pews, and form small circles for guided or spontaneous prayer? Will we invite people, on All Saints Sunday, to write the name of someone now in the communion of saints, come forward, and attach it to a banner? Will there be, today something that we do, and in doing it, remember?

Artistry

My second suggestion is that, for many people in Reformed traditions, we shall know the power of the Spirit more fully as we learn how to trust, and use, all the arts in worship. When I speak of “worship arts” I mean all the art and craft skills in a given congregation: from opera singing, jazz guitar, classical cello, drama, painting and drawing, to quilting, basket-weaving, baking, home improvement skills and cabinet making. For example, it is good if someone in the congregation knows how to make a large, evocative and beautiful banner. But it is essential to find someone who knows how to climb a ladder and string a wire across the chancel to hold the banner safely in place.

We need the arts and crafts in worship, because though there is order in the work of the Spirit, there is also Holy disorder. The Spirit sparks creativity, appeals through all the senses, makes unexpected connections, and touches us in ways that cannot be verbalized or explained.

When I speak of “creativity,” I do not mean only creativity in art. It is a great mistake to limit our concept of creativity either to “the arts,” or to the Holy Spirit.

Though we may experience the gift of creativity, of making unexpected connections, as the work of the Spirit, creativity is a creation gift from the whole Trinity, given to all humankind, in all kinds of human work: not just in “art” but in accounting, economic management, business management, scientific research, and everyday problem-solving.

All I am suggesting, within this larger framework of human creativity, is that in Trinitarian worship, the imaginative use of craft and art are among the most powerful ways the Spirit can touch us in the depth of our being.

If you remember one thing tonight, please remember this: *It is time for us, the people of the Word, who wish to be called Reformed, to renounce our distrust of the non-verbal, nonrational, inexplicable, and imaginative aspects of worship, and to trust the Third Partner in the Trinity.*

Spaces for Spirit

To quote the title of a book by Nancy Chinn, a superbly gifted visual artist with strong Presbyterian connections, our worship needs to make “Spaces for Spirit.”^{xii}

Nancy Chinn’s book is worth reading and seeing (it is beautifully illustrated). I could draw much good material from it, but have time for just one quotation. It sums up perfectly what I mean by trusting the Spirit in our worship:

“Most artists have a secret: We never end up making what we intended to create. Always along the way the art asserts itself. The materials create new tensions, new ways of seeing, new possibilities. The act of working it out uncovers what the artist could not fully have predicted

Art making is like that. We leave behind the marks of that conversation with the materials that is evidence of that same Spirit, that Holy one, stirring in the unconfined space of our imagination.

The church needs us (artists) precisely because our work cannot be explained. We say to the church. ‘You are invited to come into our work, invited to enter it, to be taken up for a moment, for a passage of time that is your life, for time away from time. You are invited to enter into a relationship. Here you are asked to encounter, to listen, to hear the other. And in the hearing, the pause, the silence, what will come?’

‘You will hear what you cannot hear alone. You will hear your new self, the self you will become. You will hear yourself, your holy self unfolding in a new response, a new thought, a new idea.’

‘What we invite you to hear cannot be controlled. It cannot be defined. It is not a gentle flow of small breezes from nowhere on a hot steamy day. No. What we unleash is the stuff of a gale, of a hurricane, of a mighty wind, of a Pentecost wind. It is the wind of freedom, the breath of revolution, the glimpse of what might yet be.’^{xiii}

Oh, that we may learn, especially in Reformed worship, to know, experience, and trust, the Spirit of the Living God!

That is my prayer tonight. Here, in conclusion, are some of my own explorations giving praise and adoration to the Three who are One, the Holy and Undivided Trinity:

Praise the Lover of Creation,

Praise the Spirit, Friend of Friends,

Praise the true Beloved, our Saviour,

**Praise the God who makes and mends,
strong, surrendered, many-splendoured,
Three whose Oneness never ends.**

Meter: 8.7.8.7.8.7. Tune: REGENT SQUARE

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How Wonderful the Three-in-One

How wonderful the Three-in-One,
whose energies of dancing light
are undivided, pure and good,
communing love in shared delight.

Before the flow of dawn and dark,
Creation's Lover dreamed of earth,
and with a caring deep and wise,
all things conceived and brought to birth.

The Lover's own Belov'd, in time,
between a cradle and a cross,
at home in flesh, gave love and life
to heal our brokenness and loss.

Their Equal Friend all life sustains
with greening power and loving care,
and calls us, born again by grace,
in Love's communing life to share.

How wonderful the Living God:
Divine Beloved, Empow'ring Friend,
Eternal Lover, Three-in-One,
our hope's beginning, way and end.

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God, the All-Holy
5.5.5.4.D.
Tune: BUNESSAN

God, the All-Holy,

Maker and Mother,
 gladly we gather,
 bringing in prayer
 old hurts for healing,
 new hopes for holding,
 giving, receiving,
 loving and care.

Spirit, All-Seeing,
 knitting and blending
 joy in desiring,
 friendship and ease,
 make our belonging
 loyal and lasting,
 so that our pledging
 freshens and frees.

Christ, All-Completing,
 Nature enfolding,
 evil exhausting
 in love's embrace,
 weaving and mending,
 make every ending
 God's new beginning
 glowing with grace.

Brian Wren

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Original completed September 1988, for people committing themselves to each other before God, and dedicated to Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, Australia. Used at our wedding (Susan M. Heafield & Brian A. Wren) on Aug 31, 1991.

Praise the Source Beyond Our Seeing

Brian A. Wren

Meter: 8.7.8.7.8.7 Trochaic

Praise the Source beyond our seeing,
 architect of time and space,
 weaving every thread of being,
 author of the human race,
 sin forgiving, captives freeing,
 well of justice, truth, and grace.

Praise the Word within our hearing:
 Christ the way, the door, the key,
 teaching, healing, persevering,
 tortured, killed by law's decree,
 new creation pioneering,
 paradigm of what will be.

Praise the Breath that powers our praises:

Living Spirit, Wind and Fire,
sowing gifts whose wealth amazes,
quick to comfort and inspire,
soaring high above earth's rages,
Dove of Peace, our heart's desire.

Holy God, your three dimensions,
each with music clear and strong,
interweave, resolving tensions,
sounding one unfolding song.
You have made us, loved and saved us.
May our praises be life-long!

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July 8, 2002. For Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, Atlanta, at the Dedication of its new Sanctuary. This Trinitarian hymn follows the traditional sequence praising the Three who are One. The final stanza suggests that, just as in certain kinds of music, different melodies create one united composition, so God's threeness is a 'polyphonic' unity. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Malden, MA/ Oxford UK: 1998), chapter 4.

Notes:

- i. Christoph Schwöbel, “Introduction - The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks,” *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, Ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 2.
- ii. Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 80.
- iii. “Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/her-self, while at the same time pouring self out into the other,” Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 271. She points out that the Greek term for this relationship, perichoresis, comes from the verb perichoreo, to encompass, not from perichoreuo (to dance around): thus, though cooperative dance is an apt metaphor for perichoresis, it does not translate it (Footnote 94, p. 312).
- iv. Susan L. Haynes, Columbia Seminary, Class on Conducting Christian Worship, analysis of morning worship at Ray-Thomas Memorial Presbyterian Church, Marietta, GA in the fall of 2000.
- v. Ruth C. Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 32. On baptism see Ruth C. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).
- vi. *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship*, p. 47.
- vii. From his hymn, “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown.” –
 'Tis Love! 'tis Love! thou diedst for me,
 I hear thy whisper in my heart.
 The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
 pure Universal Love thou art:
 to me, to all, thy mercies move—
 thy nature, and thy name is Love.
- viii. Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender*, p. 81.
- ix. Duck and Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship*, p. 6
- x. When I say “mystery” I mean the Trinity, not the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is mysterious, but the doctrine of the Trinity is a human exploration, and should be articulated as clearly as possible. See Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 16-17.
- xi. The distinction between mystery and secret is drawn from lectures by George B. Caird of Mansfield College Oxford (1917-1984).
- xii. *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), Chapter 2.
- xiii. *Ibid*, pp. 9-10.