

CHAPTER 1

The Trinity and the Gospel

Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.' (John 3:5)

Why is it that so many churches, schools, and colleges bear the name Trinity? I once taught at a British school called Trinity, and some people thought that its name came from the fact that three colleges had united to form it. But that, though true, was not the reason. We took the name Trinity College because Trinity is the Christian word for describing the Christian God.

The English Prayer Book of 1662, on which I was brought up, linked liturgical direction with tutorial instruction on many matters, and the Trinity was one of them. Accordingly, it directed that on Trinity Sunday, seven days after Pentecost, the Athanasian Creed should replace the Apostles' Creed in morning worship. Now this was not a very bright idea. The Athanasian Creed, which is a five-minute-long technical statement about the Trinity, takes a lot of unpacking; and if not unpacked, it bewilders. It contains lines like 'the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible'—which once, it is said, goaded a chorister into hissing, 'And the whole thing incomprehensible!' I doubt whether much save mystification ever resulted from these yearly recitations, and the Prayer Book's insistence on them was something for which I could only, at best, give two cheers; perhaps on reflection, only one. But the Prayer Book then made up for this leaden requirement by a stroke of real genius. It set as its Trinity Sunday Gospel Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Have you ever thought of that conversation as a revelation of what faith in the Trinity is all about? It is so, as we are going to see. 'But what do we mean by faith in the Trinity?' asks someone (and I do not blame anyone for asking; the fact is that most worshippers nowadays are far from sure). Well, as stated in the Athanasian Creed, if I may hark back to that for a moment, it is the belief that God is as truly three as he is one; that the unity of his being, his 'substance,' as the creed calls it, is personal; that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are coequal and coeternal, uncreated and inseparable, undivided though distinguishable. This is a truth that becomes clear when Jesus in the Gospels indicates, on the one hand, that though he is divine and to be worshipped, he is not the same person as the Father, whose

will he does and to whom he prays—and then indicates, on the other hand, that the Holy Spirit, who will come as his deputy, is a further divine person on the same footing as himself. It is this truth that the Athanasian Creed is spelling out.

‘But why,’ asks the enquirer, ‘does it use such long-winded laborious language?’

For a very good reason indeed. The purpose of what the creed so carefully says about the coeternity and coequality of the three persons within a single substance is defensive. The aim is to rule out erroneous ideas, of which there are always many when the Trinity is under discussion. There is, for instance, the idea that God is like the late great Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove*, one person playing several roles in a single story. We actually project that idea every time we tell a Sunday-school class that as each lump of sugar has six sides, so the one God has three faces and identities. How common an illustration that is—and how heretical! I once saw a cartoon of a moth-eaten clergyman (Anglican, of course) telling a congregation of two old ladies, ‘I know what you’re thinking—Sabellianism!’ The caption was meant, of course, as a joke (you realized that? Good). But Sabellianism is the historic name for the idea I have just mentioned, and it is, in fact, widespread.

Then there is the idea that Jesus and the Spirit are not personally divine, but are God’s two top creatures doing top jobs. Jehovah’s Witnesses think that. There is also the idea that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three gods whose solidarity in action masks the fact that they are not one in being. Mormons think that. A further false idea is that the Son is God of a weaker strain than the Father and that the Spirit’s divinity is weaker still. All these ideas had a run for their money in the early church before being condemned as heresies. All of them still pop up from time to time today.

What this shows is that the idea of the Trinity is one of the hardest thoughts round which the human mind has ever been asked to wrap itself. It is far easier to get it wrong than to get it right. So if it were proposed that the Athanasian Creed should be not just dropped from public worship, but removed from the Prayer Book entirely, I should vote against the motion. The Athanasian Creed is historically a classic witness against unbiblical distortions and denials of the triunity of our God, and such witnesses will always be needed.

When, however, we turn to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, we find faith in the Trinity presented in quite a different light—not now as the linchpin of orthodox belief (which nonetheless it is), but as, literally and precisely, the sinner’s way of salvation. How does Jesus’ teaching here do this? Let me show you how.

Thirty years ago, in a 90-degree heat wave, a student group led me to the top of a three-thousand-foot mountain outside Vancouver. The climb was rugged and the sweat was copious, but the view was glorious. When afterwards I asked where we had been, I was told I had climbed the Squamish Chief. I climbed it, however, without knowing what it was or what to call it. That is my illustration of how John 3:1–15, which we rightly think of as a passage proclaiming the gospel,

introduces us to the Trinity. As one learns the Christian gospel and enters by faith into the riches of fellowship with God that it holds forth, one is, in fact, mastering the mystery of the Triune God. We might say he is climbing the mountain called the Trinity all the time, whether he realizes it or not. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus makes this very clear. Look at it with me now.

Nicodemus, a senior Jewish ruler and theologian, a man as eminent as an archbishop, a cardinal, or a distinguished professor today, has come to meet Jesus, the novice preacher from the Galilean back-woods, who is in Jerusalem, it seems, for the first time since his ministry started. Being older (he appears to call himself an old man in verse 4 and was probably twice Jesus' age), Nicodemus speaks first. His opening words are kind words, words of affirmation and welcome. 'Rabbi (teacher),' he says, giving the young preacher a title of honour straight away, 'we [that is, "my colleagues and I," Jerusalem's top people] know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him' (v. 2). As if to say: 'I am sure, Jesus, that you are wondering whether we of the religious establishment accept you and approve of what you are doing and regard you as one of us. Well now, I am here to tell you that we do, and we shall be happy to have you as a regular member of our discussion circle (the Jerusalem Theological Society, as we might call it). Come and join us!' Such was the burden of Nicodemus' speech.

Do you see, now, what Nicodemus was doing under all that politeness? By treating Jesus as a recruit for the Jewish establishment, he was patronizing the Son of God! But Jesus did not accept patronage from Nicodemus or anyone else while he was on earth, just as he will not accept your patronage or mine now that he reigns in heaven. It is for us to bow down before him, not to expect him to bow down before us, whoever we are. So Jesus does not respond by thanking Nicodemus for his kind words. He strikes a different note and tells his eminent visitor that without being born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God. When Nicodemus expresses bewilderment, Jesus amplifies his meaning in the words of our text: 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.' Then he explains that natural and spiritual birth are two different things and concludes: 'You should not be surprised at my saying, "You [plural: "you, Nicodemus, and all those whom you represent"] must be born again"' (v. 5, 7).

Three Persons

I ask you, now, to notice two things. The first is that *there are three persons* mentioned in verse 5, which is our text. There is the 'I' of 'I tell you the truth,' the speaker, Jesus himself—God's 'one and only Son,' as John, in 1:14, has already called him, and as the beloved verse 16 of this chapter will call him again. There is

‘God,’ the One whom Jesus called Father and taught his disciples to call Father—God whose kingdom Jesus is announcing. And there is the Holy Spirit, through whose power in new creation one must start life all over again, if one is ever to see and enter the kingdom. These are the three persons of the divine Trinity who are our special concern now. This is the first of a number of places in John’s gospel where all three are spoken of together.

Three Stages

The second thing I ask you to notice is that *there are three stages* in the flow of Jesus’ response to Nicodemus. We may set them out as follows.

Do you want to see and enter the kingdom of God? Then you must be born again, of water and the Spirit (vv. 3–10).

What is the kingdom of God? The whole New Testament makes clear that it is not a territorial realm (unless you think of the human heart as a territory), but a personal relationship. The kingdom exists in any life where God is made King and Jesus the Saviour is acknowledged as Lord. The relationship brings salvation from sin and Satan and spiritual death. Jesus bestows forgiveness of sins, adoption into God’s family, and the joy of eternal life on all who entrust their destiny to him and give him the love and loyalty of their hearts. To this new relationship, the path—the only path, as Jesus explains to Nicodemus—is new birth. ‘You must be born again.’ Without new birth one can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God.

What is this new birth? What does it mean to be ‘born of water and the Spirit’? Briefly, and with due respect to other views (for the ground here is much fought over), I state what seems to me to be quite clear. All explanations of this key phrase that posit a contrast between ‘water’ (John’s baptism, Christian baptism, or the waters of physical birth) and ‘the Spirit’ are on the wrong track. ‘Water’ and ‘the Spirit’ are two aspects of one reality: namely, God’s renewal of the fallen and unresponsive human heart. Jesus is referring back to these two aspects, the purifying and the energizing aspects, just as they were set forth in God’s promise to renew Israelite hearts in Ezekiel 36:25–27:

I will sprinkle clean water on you . . . I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you . . . I will *put my Spirit* in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (*italics mine*)

Sinners who are naturally and habitually in rebellion against God, as were the Jews of Ezekiel’s day and of Jesus’ day—and as we are, too, with the rest of the human race—need an inward cleansing and a change of heart that only God can bring about. Of this inward transformation, ‘new birth’ is a two-word illustration—a parable, in fact. The change is so radical and drastic that it

constitutes a totally fresh start to one's life. That is what makes the picture of being born again so fitting a way to describe it.

Why am I sure that Jesus' words about water and the Spirit look back to Ezekiel? Because of the way Jesus chides Nicodemus in verse 10. 'You are Israel's teacher,' he says, 'and do you not understand these things?' Jesus is implying that such ignorance is shameful in a Jewish teacher. But the rebuke only has point if the things Nicodemus did not understand were things that the Jewish Scriptures clearly set forth.

Thus Jesus lays it down that only through new birth can Nicodemus, or you, or I, or anyone else, come into the kingdom of God. This leads to the second stage in his flow of thought.

Do you want to be born again? Then you must be willing to learn from Jesus Christ (vv. 11–13).

You have met people whose behaviour leads you to say, 'You can't tell them anything.' In verse 11, Jesus says that Nicodemus and his peers are behaving that way towards him and his disciples: 'I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.' By Nicodemus' own admission, the Jewish theologians did not know about the new birth and God's present kingdom, but they had not so far shown any willingness to accept teaching on these things from Jesus, the country preacher. Yet Jesus was in reality the Son of man—that is, the Messiah—who had come down from heaven, as verse 13 declares, in order to make these things known! Before we condemn those Jewish leaders, however we should ask ourselves if we are any wiser than they were at this point. Do we let Jesus teach us spiritual things? Have we let him teach us our need of new birth?

Will we let him teach us the way into God's kingdom? This is the topic to which he now moves on. Hear him well, then, as he utters his final challenging words about it.

Are you willing to learn from Jesus Christ? Then let him teach you to trust in him and his cross for your salvation (vv. 14–15).

Once more Jesus refers to the Old Testament—this time to the story in Numbers 21:6–9, which tells how Israelites suffering snakebite were told to look at a brass snake that Moses, at God's command, had put up on a pole: and those who looked lived. 'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert,' says Jesus, 'so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.' The final message to Nicodemus, and to us, is this: Believe in Jesus—that is, trust in him, rely on him, tell him that he is your only hope, embrace him as your Saviour—and your sins will be forgiven, your sickness of spirit healed, and your uncleanness before God washed away. Then you will know that you, too, have been born again.

The statement of verses 14 and 15, pointing as it does to Jesus' cross as the means of our salvation, is the purest gospel, as is the beloved sixteenth verse that

follows it: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' In learning the good news from these words, we are on familiar ground. But what I am asking you to notice now is that the entire conversation with Nicodemus presents us with profound teaching about the Trinity also, by setting before us the person and work both of God's Son and of God's Spirit. Jesus, we learn, is the God-sent, divine-human sin-bearer, who by his cross secured eternal life for us. The Spirit is the divine regenerator who by transforming our inner disposition, and in that sense changing our nature, enables us to experience the life of the kingdom of God. Without the Son and the Spirit there can be no salvation for anyone.

One Truth

What it amounts to, then, is that in this passage, as in many more throughout the New Testament, the truths of the Holy Trinity and of sovereign saving grace prove to be not two truths but one. The doctrine of salvation is the good news of the Father's giving us his Son to redeem us and his Spirit to renew us. The doctrine of the Trinity is the good news of three divine persons working together to raise us into spiritual life and bring us to the glory of God's kingdom. The Athanasian Creed guards this good news in the way that fences round a field guard growing crops from preying animals. Such fences are needed, but they do not have equal value with the crops they protect, and such value as they have derives from those crops themselves. Trinitarian orthodoxy, in other words, has value only as it sustains and safeguards evangelical faith.

Two conclusions follow for us, therefore.

First: Do not dismiss the doctrine of the Trinity as so much useless lumber for the mind. If the place of any of the three persons is misconceived or denied, the gospel falls. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, and those liberal Protestants for whom the personal deity of the Son and the Spirit is suspect, can never state the gospel rightly because they think of the Godhead wrongly. Clear confession of the Trinity is foundational. The gospel proclaims precisely the joint saving action of the three persons, and it is lost as soon as one's hold on their distinct divine personhood slackens.

Second: Let the doctrine of the Trinity keep your understanding of the gospel in good shape. Let it remind you to give equal emphasis in your thinking and your witness to the sovereign initiative of the Father who planned salvation, the atoning sacrifice of the Son who obtained salvation, and the mighty power of the Spirit who applies salvation. Let it prompt you to lay equal stress on the love of each in the work of grace. The late Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to tell how early in his ministry a senior pastor said to him that having listened to several of Lloyd-Jones's sermons, he could not make out whether 'the Doctor' was a Quaker

or a hyper-Calvinist, because all the sermons centred on either the Spirit's work in the human heart or the sovereignty of God in salvation, and so little was said about the cross and faith in the crucified Saviour. 'The Doctor' quickly took the point! But there are many preachers today, and other Christians, too, who in their thinking and speaking either stress the cross all the time and say all too little about the Spirit, or stress God's saving plan or the Spirit's renewing work all the time and say all too little about the cross. Take care! False proportions in our doctrine are the beginning of false doctrine itself.

So let the truth of the Trinity keep you balanced at this point. Make it a matter of conscience to do full justice in your thought, your speech, and your worship, both in public and in private, to the love, wisdom, power, and achievement of each divine person separately, as well as of all three together. Then your theology will benefit, and your soul will prosper, and your whole life will express, as it should, the spirit of this old and precious doxology with which I close:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.