

“The Familial Character of God and the Church”

Romans 8:12–17

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Various theological questions have been posed over the years as a litmus test of orthodox faith, and various creative responses have been concocted to avoid trouble without being dishonest. Years ago, a colleague’s father who worked at the Home Mission Board was interrogated by the fundamentalists taking over the SBC to see if he was a true believer and thus worthy of retaining his job. One question they asked was, “Do you believe Adam and Eve are real people?” He said, “Yes,” not because he took the Genesis creation accounts literally but because he knew people named Adam and Eve, and they were real.

Another question to which a shifty answer has been given is as to whether we believe in the Virgin Birth. Someone replied that he didn’t have any difficulty believing that Jesus was a virgin when he was born. The intent was not to make light of the claim but to question whether the validity of one’s faith hinges on a literal interpretation of this one story. It is a story designed to support the claim that God was in Christ in a unique way, but even taken literally, it doesn’t tell us exactly how this happened in biological terms, thanks be to God!

There are different motivations for asking such questions and for answering them in a variety of ways, and I say this to present a context for the question of this day in the Christian year, which is — do we believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? This might seem like a no-brainer; of course, we do! But my answer is, “No,” I do not believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. I believe in the *mystery* of the Holy Trinity. This may seem like splitting hairs over a minor detail, but when it comes to doctrines, there are no details too small to be significant.

The word “doctrine” points to a formalized central belief. Such beliefs become the skeletal structure of faith, and they are important, but they are not everything, even though they are often used to demand compliance. In Baptist life historically, very few such beliefs are

considered essential, as we place a premium on the freedom of the individual, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern matters of faith. And this discernment, by individuals and communities, takes a great deal of time and prayerful reflection.

It took the early church, long before there were any Baptists, three hundred years to develop a statement about the Holy Trinity. That happened at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. Believers in the New Testament period experienced God as three persons, but the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible. Over time, people reflected on their experience, very much like they did on the experience of Pentecost we considered last week, they debated with one another, and eventually they came up with a statement about one God in three distinct persons sharing one essence/nature/substance (*homoousion*).

But when you read this statement, and when you read any of the books that have been written about it, you quickly realize that we are trying to describe the indescribable, we are pointing to a mystery that is beyond comprehension. In fact, it seems like heresy to say that we have comprehended it when doing so would be to put God in a box, to make a god of our understanding of God. The idea of Trinity begins with the experience of God as three persons, and then gets developed over time with prayerful reflection, but we are still reflecting to this day. There is ever more to understand. It is a mystery, a sacred mystery.

But having said all this, having noted the limitations of anything we say about the Trinity, I want to examine today’s reading from Romans and consider the light it might shed on our understanding. It is a text, like several others, including our reading from John, where the word “Trinity” is not mentioned, but God, Jesus, and the Spirit are. Each of these texts tells us something, and what this passage tells us is that while God is one, there is a familial dimension to the character of God, and thus the nature of God’s community, the church, as well.

The language of family is all over this text. Fellow believers are *sisters* and *brothers*. God adopts us as *children* and we cry to God, saying, “*Abba! Father!*” The Spirit leads the *children* of God, and we *children* are also heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, God’s *Son*, if we

suffer with him so that we might be glorified with him. Parent/child, sister/brother — this is the language Paul uses to describe the character of God and the nature of the church.

We might wonder how God can be one and yet also a family. Does God have a dissociative identity disorder, manifesting multiple personalities? And if so, what would have been the underlying trauma? I suppose relating to humankind can be pretty traumatic... Our daughter didn't have this disorder, but she did have imaginary friends when she was young. We would ask her a question, and she would say, "Ali is not here. Alla is, and Other Ali, would you like to talk to one of them?"

I think we can trust that neither of these things is what is going on with the Triune God. God does not have a dissociative disorder nor does God need imaginary friends, but if we think about the Trinity long enough, and try to make sense of it in a linear way, we will end up in confusion. The point is that somehow, beyond our understanding, within the character of God, there is a familial dimension, which means an intimate way of relating between Parent, Child, and Spirit; and in this family, everyone has equal standing, equal voice, equal significance.

But this hasn't stopped Christians from ranking the Trinity in various ways. Evangelicals can sometimes be Christomonistic in their practice, speaking almost exclusively about Jesus, rarely mentioning God as Creator, and being terrified of the Spirit! Pentecostals can get so carried away with the Spirit that you wonder where God and Jesus have gone! And someone once told me that a priest advised him that marriage is like the Trinity. The persons of God prefer to relate to one another as equals, but when push comes to shove, God the Father has the final word. Thus, the man has the final word in a marriage. I'm not sure which is worse in this thinking — the theology or the psychology!

In the intimate familial being known as God, Parent, Child, and Spirit are of equal essence/nature/substance. All are a part of who God has always been and always will be, and all are of equal value. There is no hierarchy within the character of God.

Now, I realize your eyes may have started to glaze over by now. Any sermon on the Trinity runs this risk. What's the point if we can't

understand it anyway? And what difference does it make for us? Perhaps the Apostle Paul's real concern in Romans 8 can help us here, at least keep us awake a little longer. He is not delving into the depths of mystery; he is addressing basic human needs. He is using the familial character of God to draw people into the church as a community.

And what he is saying about the character of God has direct implications for the nature of God's community. As there is no hierarchy in the character of God, there is no hierarchy in the church. Everyone has equal standing, we are all family, sisters and brothers. All who are led by the Spirit are children of God, Paul says to the church at Rome. We received not a spirit of slavery but a spirit of adoption.

For some, this term may have little meaning. For others, it may have negative connotations. We were adopted, but treated differently, like a redheaded stepchild — not that there is anything wrong with red hair or being a stepchild! But for many of us who have been adopted — I was by my father of nurture — adoption means full inclusion, being loved as a child such that terms like adoption and stepchild aren't even used. That was my experience. And that is what Paul is talking about.

We cry, "Abba! Father!" Paul says, because we are embraced as children. Abba is the Aramaic for father, it is how Jesus referred to God. It is an intimate term, and so some scholars have suggested that we should translate it as "Daddy" while other scholars note that children and adults use the term. I would counter by saying that both children and adults can refer to parents in intimate terms like Daddy, and it is how we use a term that matters anyway. Dana refers to her father as C.D. because he is Charles Dan White, Jr. It may sound cold, but it is a term of endearment. I call him Mr. White Sir, like all who worked for him.

Jesus refers to God as Abba, Father, Daddy, but because of the way he uses this term and speaks of God, my theology professor Frank Tupper said Jesus' image is of a Motherly Father; a tender, nurturing father. We all cry to this God, Paul says, as adopted children, fully embraced in love, so much so that we are not just children, but joint heirs with Christ.

Having a full inheritance is one of the clearest signs of acceptance in any family. Of course, this inheritance is the privilege of suffering

with Christ so that we can experience his glory, but it is still an inheritance. And each of us receives it, each of us is loved and accepted, each of us is meant to feel at home in the presence of God.

The concept of God being three persons of equal essence/nature/substance, *homoousion*, may not seem critical to us, but the concepts of family, belonging, and home do. We all need people who love us, a place to feel welcome, somewhere to call home. When we use the old language of “church home” we are saying a lot more than we realize. We are saying that being among these people is home to us. And we are saying that being where God is has become home for us.

Home is not just a place; it is the sense of being fully welcomed, secure, at peace; being where we want to be; being where we ought to be. I think of the scene in the film “The Notebook” where Noah’s children are trying to convince him to leave the facility where their mother has to stay because of advanced dementia and come home. She doesn’t even know any of them, they insist. But Noah refuses, saying, “That’s my sweetheart in there. I’m not leaving her. This is my home now. Your mother is my home.”

I think also of Robert Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Man.” An unreliable farmhand named Silas returns home after being gone a long time. The woman of the house says he has come home to die, but the man notes that Silas has no cause to call it home, he left when he was needed most. Silas’ own brother, who is rich, won’t take him in because “he’s the kind kinfolk can’t abide.” But the woman insists that they take him in, saying, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

These are beautiful and compelling images of home, a deep-down sense of being welcomed, accepted, safe, purposeful, where we ought to be. *Your mother is my home. Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.* The Triune God invites us all to feel at-home in this sense, to know we are welcome in God’s familial presence and in the company of God’s people. We are family, no one is left out, everyone is welcome. Somehow that sounds better than a doctrine or a mystery.