

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Exodus 3:1–6; Psalm 93; Romans 8:12–17; John 3:1–17**

In the early 1980s, when the 1979 Prayer Book was beginning to be used throughout the church, there were clergy who would begin the Holy Eucharist not with the words, “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Instead, they said, “Blessed be God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” However, this was not a new insight into the nature of God. God is not defined by what God did or does.

Christians believe in God’s “presence and activity in the world.”¹ Christians believe in God’s “eternal and infinity reality beyond . . . beyond time and space.”² Christians believe in God’s nature as Three Persons in one Substance³. I hesitate here even to quote from the Nicene Creed and say, “one Being.” I want to tell you why.

The late James Griffiss was professor of systematic and philosophical theology at Nashotah House when I was a student. Digression: he was on sabbatical in the winter and spring of 1965 when Donald Garfield became the seventh rector of Saint Mary’s. He served here for six months as an assisting priest while writing a book.

Father Griffiss urged us always to use the phrasing of the Prayer Book when we spoke about the Trinity. It is very easy to say the wrong thing. In addition to the “creator, redeemer, and sanctifier” mistake, he used several other examples to make his point that I cannot now remember.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “God,” 575.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Trinity, Doctrine of the,” 1394–95.

My bookkeeping program tells me that on February 2 of this year, I ordered a copy of *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* by St. Gregory of Nazianzus.⁴ I don't remember what I was reading that made a reference to it and interested me in ordering it. Lionel Wickham translated all but one oration. He was a parish priest in the Church of England and a lecturer in Divinity at Cambridge University.⁵ His translation of Gregory's words from Greek draws me to sense that I perhaps may have the slightest, fleeting glimpse of the mystery of God, without getting too close, without trespassing or overthinking. This might suggest another reason why the word "being" really is the right word for us in our translation of the creed.

I have known of Gregory of Nazianzus because he, Basil of Caesarea, and Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa, are known as the Cappadocian Fathers—from an area in the larger part the nation of Turkey. They are all in the church calendar. They were among the great fourth-century theologians who secured the faith expressed by the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 and at the Council of Constantinople in the year 381.⁶

Gregory of Nazianzus was first bishop of Nazianzus, in succession to his father. During the council of Constantinople, the emperor appointed him bishop of Constantinople. There was opposition to him to this appointment. He was forced to resign. Another took his place. But Gregory spoke and taught in a way that appealed to a broad audience of his time and place. His writings and his famous orations carried the day theologically. He is known in Christian history as "The Theologian."⁷

⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, St., *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, with introduction and notes by Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

⁵ <https://www.amazon.com/God-Christ-Theological-Cledonius-Patristics/dp/0881412406>, (accessed 30 May 2021).

⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Cappadocian Fathers, The.," 237.

⁷ *Ibid.*, sv. "Gregory of Nazianzus, St.," 599.

Among the Bible verses every Baptist kid memorizes are the last words of Matthew's gospel. My King James Version memory is not so good anymore, so I read them to you: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."⁸ I have been living with the Trinity for as long as I can remember.

I didn't appreciate—or remember—how much fourth-century debates involved questions of how to speak about Jesus Christ. Who is he? What is he? The debate about his divinity and humanity would drag on until the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451. The focus of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 was about the Holy Spirit being the Third Person of the Trinity.

Gregory drew not only from the Old Testament, including Isaiah and the Psalms, but also greatly from John's gospel and from the Letters of Paul to argue for believing that the Holy Spirit was one Person of the Trinity. God had revealed this truth to the Church. The Holy Spirit was, as Nicaea had proclaimed, "of one substance"—the most literal translation of the Greek word here—with the Father and the Son.

I don't think it's unimportant, for whatever awareness and understanding of God that I have now, that I grew up going to church with my family and singing hymns. The first hymn in *The Baptist Hymnal* that I grew up with was, "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty"—its text is about as Trinitarian as it gets. *The Hymnal 1982* was still new when I became rector of Trinity Church, Michigan City, Indiana, in 1988. In the same way that members of Saint Mary's belt out "Ye who own the faith Jesus" on the Marian festivals here, at Trinity, the big hymn was, "I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity."⁹ When anyone complained about

⁸ Matthew 28:19–20 (KJV).

⁹ *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America 1940* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1940, 1943), n. 268.

learning a new hymn, I would remind them, whichever new hymn it was, that it was an easier hymn to sing than “I bind.”

Finally, I’m very aware that I cannot control my emotions as a celebrant, if I sing the final verses of William Waltham How’s, “For all the saints, who from their labors rest” to the tune *Sine Nomine*, composed for this text by Ralph Vaughan Williams. These are the words of the last two short verses: “But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day; the saints triumphant rise in bright array; the King of glory passes on his way. From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia, alleluia.”

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