

Problem: What does theology tell us about God? When does it fall short?

-The Holy Trinity decides to go on a vacation. The Son proposes to go to San Francisco, but the Father finds that place too liberal minded. So the Father proposes to go to Jerusalem. "I can't go on vacation there!" says the Son, "That's where I got killed! I can't believe you just said that!" A fight breaks out, and the Holy Spirit walks out. "If y'all can't come up with something when I come back, we're not going anywhere!" An hour later the Holy Spirit walks back into the room, and the Father and the Son excitedly say they want to go to Rome. "Rome?" says the Holy Spirit, "Great idea! I've never been there before!"

-For many of us pastors, the Trinity becomes something of a hot potato. It's a concept that few of us can really adequately explain, but there are lots of jokes about it like the one I just shared with you. Yet occasionally it seems that it has to be flashed like a driver's license or passport in order to prove that you are a true Christian.

-Jayson's Approval Essay: "Describe your faith in the Triune God and how your Trinitarian faith has informed your understanding of the Trinity's mission? Based on your responses to the previous question, especially your theological constructs above, how has your understanding of yourself as a missional leader been shaped by your personal faith in the Triune God? Please share your key theological building blocks."¹ Jayson did a great job in answering this question in his essay and I am not here to argue that the Trinity should go away or that seminary candidates should get easier questions.

-However, I do wonder if there is a disconnect between the theological understanding of the Trinity and what God is up to on the ground. You probably would think your pastor has gone off his rocker if I came to your house after a death of a loved one, or complicated surgery, or in the midst of a deep crisis and immediately started talking to you about the Paraclete's presence in the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

-When does theology help us and when does it break down? As theologian Brian McLaren says: when does the Holy Trinity become a litmus test and when does it become an image of diversity within God's self?

Solution: Theology is very useful in showing how we can define ourselves and how God and the church can move together as US.

-The very act of doing theology is actually very simple and the word *theology* points to this. The word itself is the combination of two ancient Greek words: *Theo*, meaning "God" and *logia* (shares the same root as *logos*) meaning "to name" or "to speak". Theology, at its core, basically means "to name God".

-Thus, we have the important but lesser told story of Abraham and Hagar. You can hear the desperation of this Egyptian woman in this story who has to run away into the wilderness because of the terrible jealousy and punishment that ensues on her from

¹ <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ApprovalEssayDocument.pdf>

Sarah. But, you can also hear God's blessing and promise to Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Because of this, Hagar names God. Hagar, a castaway, pregnant, foreigner is the first theologian in the entire Bible. Hagar, who names the God of Israel *El-roi* which means "the God who sees", powerfully shows us how theology can bring us closer to the divine.

-What name would you give God? What kind of "God-namer" or theologian would you be?

-Diana Butler Bass, a well respected "God namer", has talked about why doing theology is so important. "In practicing theology," she writes "we define both God's and our own 'relational selfhood'." Yes we are "individuals", as our society reinforces again and again, but our individual self is totally defined by relationship. I'm not just Eric in a stand alone vacuum, but I am Eric the pastor, Eric the husband, Eric the (hopefully) future father, Eric the brother, Eric the friend. Each of these names reveal who I am in a different way. God is the same way. The Trinity then, expresses God's relational self in a very important way.

-The litmus test problem which I mentioned at the beginning, which makes the Trinity the butt of a lot of jokes, isn't the expression of God's relational selfhood, but is the problem that the Trinity is used by the church to limit God's selfhood. When we only say that God's name can be three things: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God can become stale.

-The Trinity comes out of a worldview historians call Neoplatonism. Based on the philosophical writings of Plato, Neoplatonist philosophers continued his concepts with the breaking down the world into three parts: God, ideas, and matter. It is no surprise then that Christians, striving for acceptance and understanding, fit their theology into this widely accepted, three-part, world view.

-1,500 years later, our world view, though still based in Plato's theories, has expanded from just three parts. Has our practice of naming God expanded with it?

Implication:In our naming of God, we make God real.

-Diana Butler Bass writes: "If the church is going to have a future, it's going to be where the idea of US is expanded." If the Trinity is to define who we are as a church, it must be used to expand the naming of God, not constrict it. God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must continue to be named. But so should God as mother, God as shepherd, God as lover, and God as friend. The naming of God allows the divine to be real and relevant, not collecting dust on a bookshelf.

-The good news is that God through Jesus Christ is still working in and through each and every one of us in new ways. The good news is that all of us, even Hagar, can name God and show how God is real. This is, I believe, what makes God God and what informs who we are as theologians and disciples of Christ.

-May God burst through you today and always. May you, filled with awe and courage, give that bursting a name. Amen.