

Trinitarian Continuity

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“*Yahweh* reigns, robed in splendor; / You are robed, *Yahweh*, girded with strength. / *Yahweh* has established the world; / it stands firm; / it shall never be moved; / Indeed, Your throne, / Your reign is established from of old, / from ages past; / from everlasting to everlasting / from eternity You exist.” — Psalm 93:1-2.

The year was 1996, February 1996 to be exact, my last semester at Bangor Theological Seminary. Back then once a seminary student had entered the last semester that student could circulate a profile, a résumé for a pastor, a 20 to 30 page résumé.

And so, out my profile went to unsuspecting Search Committees all over the United States. Dozens of Search Committees from Iowa, Michigan, South Dakota, Maine, Connecticut and New York contacted me. I did phone interviews with some.

Some wanted an interview, but once I saw their profile I declined. When a pastor sends a profile to a church that church, if interested, sends their profile back. A church profile, is a 20 to 30 page résumé of a church. I declined some interviews because I felt they were not a match for my gifts, for who I am.

I suspect one reason my profile got a lot of interest is, even though I was about to graduate from seminary, I already had pulpit experience. I had served for two years as Assistant Pastor at a five church cooperative in Waldo County, Maine.

Now the profile twenty plus years ago had what was called a “forced choice” survey to fill out. The pastor had to check boxes from a list of 43 choices as to what that pastor thought their own gifts were. Then eight references for the pastor had to do the same— assess the gifts of the pastor, fill out the same survey, check boxes.

This was a “forced choice” survey because there were 43 boxes you *could* check. You had to choose 8, only 8. That was hard.

There were some obvious boxes to check: an effective preacher, a helpful counselor, makes pastoral calls— obvious. Some were not so obvious but were really good choices— works well on a team, accepting of divergent backgrounds. But all these were binary choices, a yes or no choice. Either the box was checked or it was not.

This history came to mind because of my duties on the Susquehanna Association Committee on Authorized Ministry. We are reviewing our polices for ordination so we looked at the current profile. In the new one the forced choice gauntlet no longer exists.

We now have the Faithful and Effective Marks of Ministry— 48 of them. But this is very different. These marks try to not be at all binary, yes or no. These try to be textured.

A serious and important possibility each mark poses is the idea that every last mark has 4 different levels of understanding. Just mathematics here: if each of 48 marks has 4 levels that’s 192 possibilities to be considered.

I would be the first to insist some marks just do not have multiple levels even though that’s the claim of the profile. For instance, one of the Marks of Ministry says a pastor needs to hold active membership in a local church. Now, either you belong to a church or you do not. That’s binary.

On the other hand the Mark of Ministry labeled as “Praying actively and nurturing spiritual practices” might have not just four levels. That one might have dozens of levels.

There is another mark which sounds binary, or perhaps to our 21st Century American ears it sounds binary. This Mark of Ministry says, “Acknowledging Jesus, the Christ, as the Sole Head of the Church.”

But *is* this binary? Is this mark a yes or a no answer? Jesus is the head of the church; Jesus is not the head of the church? Or is the concept that the Christ is Head of the Church subtle, textured, complex with multiple levels? (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Psalm 93. “*Yahweh* reigns, robed in splendor; / You are robed, *Yahweh*, girded with strength. / *Yahweh* has established the world; / it stands firm; / it shall never be moved; / Indeed, Your throne, / Your reign is established from of old, / from ages past; / from everlasting to everlasting / from eternity You exist.” (Slight pause.)

Pilate, prefect of Rome in Judaea, tries to get Jesus to proclaim some kind of temporal, finite authority. Jesus avoids addressing temporal, finite authority. Instead Jesus speaks of witnessing to truth, eternal truth.

This is one of many truths to which Jesus attested: Jesus is the Christ. This is a subtle, textured complex claim and I think we have a difficult time grappling with how subtle, textured, complex it is.

Let me unpack that. Christ is Greek for Messiah. Messiah is one anointed to do the work and the will of God.

Indeed, as you heard earlier, today we celebrate a feast of the church: the Reign of the Christ. Of course, the word reign implies some kind of temporal authority.

But what do we Christians claim about the Messiahship of Jesus? Is it about finite authority? No. It is not about finite authority. We claim that in Jesus God is revealed— *in Jesus God is revealed*.

So, it seems to me connecting Jesus to temporal authority might simply be convenient shorthand. But it’s sloppy, not subtle, textured, complex.

We, of course, do not live in a society which particularly appreciates subtle, textured, complex. And this is where I think the reading from Psalm 93 comes into play and is helpful.

The Psalm leads us to a question: Who is the God Jesus proclaims? Jesus not only proclaims the God of the Hebrews, but Jesus refers to God by an intimate name. Jesus does not call God father. Jesus refers to *Yahweh*, God, as *Abba*, Daddy.

Please ask yourself what Jesus, in naming God ‘Daddy,’ might be saying about God? This is, after all, the God of the Hebrews, proclaimed in the Psalms, Who in the Hebrew tradition is proclaimed as One.

Further and again, Jesus says temporal, finite authority, is not a part of the picture. Further and again, Jesus also says I am the Christ, the Messiah, anointed to do the work and the will of *Yahweh*, God.

That leaves us with an obvious question. ‘Who is Jesus?’ People do often and accurately say Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. So, if Jesus is the Messiah and if *Yahweh*, the God Jesus proclaims, *is* One, explain how Jesus, the Messiah, fits into the idea, the theological concept, that God is One. (Slight pause.)

It takes the church better than three centuries of thinking about this to respond. The place the church winds up has been given a grand name. We call it Trinity— three persons, One God.

I want to point out two things about this idea we call Trinity. First, Trinity insists *we* have a connection with *Yahweh*, God. That connection is Jesus.

Second, Trinity clearly insists there is some kind of relationship, a connection between God and the Messiah. The language Christians have historically used to explain the connection of God and Jesus is relational. Hence, the term ‘Father.’

But again, father is not the word Jesus used. Jesus used Daddy. I think the implication of using this kind of human familial language is not about Father-son, nor about Daddy-child. The implication is theological. It is about the sense of closeness God has with humanity and the sense of closeness humanity might have with God.

So, Trinity— Trinity which might sound like a high faluting subtle, textured, complex idea— Trinity is really about one thing and one thing only. Trinity says God loves us so much relationship matters.

And yes love is a subtle, textured, complex thing. Relationship is a subtle, textured, complex thing.

This brings me back to that Mark of Ministry which acknowledges Jesus, the Christ, as the Sole Head of the Church. Does Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, love us as God, the first person of the Trinity, loves us? If the answer is ‘yes’ seeing Jesus as the sole head of the church should be a part of a pastor’s profile.

And, as was said earlier, it is a Mark of Ministry in that profile. However, I need to point out that acknowledging Jesus as the Sole Head of the Church is not a mark only for pastors.

You see, when I got information from a church in Norwich, New York 20 plus years ago, a profile and a whole packet of information is what I got, one thing impressed me a lot. An enclosed Sunday bulletin said this: “Interim pastor: Charles Maxfield; Ministers: All the people.”

You see, Marks of Ministry are not simply traits for which we look in pastors. Marks of Ministry are traits in churches, traits found in parishioners, in the congregation.

And so for me, the point of Psalm 93, the point of the Messiahship of Jesus is not as subtle, textured, complex as it might seem. In a real way the point is rather simple.

The Psalm says God loves us. The Psalms, all of them, say God loves us. And Jesus, the One connected intimately to God, loves us. Therefore, when we, the church, show the love of Jesus, the Christ, to all people— we, the church— we are showing a Mark of Ministry. Amen.

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United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “As you heard earlier the Church, in it’s wisdom, has designated the last Sunday before Advent as the Feast of the Reign of Christ. Advent leads us toward Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, the Feast of the Birth of the Messiah. A number of years ago one parishioner told me she now understood Christmas is not about magic babies or angels or stables. What is Christmas about? Christmas is about us understanding the connection of *Yahweh*, God and the Messiah, the

Christ. Christmas is about us understanding our connection, the connection of humanity with *Yahweh*, God and the Messiah, the Christ.”

BENEDICTION: Let us receive the gifts of God’s grace and peace. Let us rejoice in the freedom to love as Jesus loved. Let the Spirit of God speak through us today. Go forth and reach out to everyone you meet in the name of Christ. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ rule among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.