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The Triune God as a Driving Force Behind a Healthy Growing Church

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The teaching of the Triune God has been reasonably well established as a Biblically-grounded doctrine. Additionally, a considerable part (17%) of the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs directly deals with the doctrine of God. Within these beliefs, particular attention is given to the relationship of the Trinity and Word of God. Each person of the Godhead has a unique role and contribution to the existence, meaning, and use of the Bible (Ministerial Association 2005:11-21).

The chapter in the fundamental beliefs book on the Godhead describes, among other things, the dynamics within the Godhead; a picture of loving relationships and working interactions is painted. Although there is no examination of how and to what extent might relationships within the Godhead affect the mission, operation, and wellbeing of the Church, it beautifully describes the aspect of Christian fellowship within the context of the church as a family. “It [fellowship] involves genuine fellowship with God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14, RSV, NIV), as well as with believers (1 John 1:3,7)” (Ministerial Association 2005:169).

While the sub-title of Whidden, Moon, and Reeves’ book The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships sounds practical in dealing with Christian relationships, the book itself is a more an apologetic study of the issue of Trinity - looking for logical reasons to support the idea of the Trinity in the Bible, in history, and in theology (2002:272). When it comes to implications of this doctrine, however, the book addresses a few items that may no longer be viewed as relevant. Nevertheless, in the conclusion, the authors argue:

“This profound doctrine forms the essential basis for the very heart of what is unique to Christianity. Out of our insights to the trinity emerges our very understanding of the greatest of all Biblical notions—God is love. Such love is defined not just by feeling or human experience—but by none other than the Creator and Redeemer God of the universe Himself. And the definitions of love that really count are those that reside in the very core or substance of God’s eternal triune nature (2002:279).”

Thus, the book provides solid grounds for discussion about the current relevant and important issues related to Trinity.

It also appears that among the fundamental beliefs of the SDA church, there is no particular article on the mission of the church in relation of the Triune God. Mission is described as one of the most important tasks of the church and is treated as such. The term “mission” itself in the book Seventh-day Adventists Believe is discussed under the umbrella of remnants; therefore, only a segment of mission is elaborated upon without any reference to “*Missio Dei*” and to what makes church the church. It is surprising there is no official document dealing with missional ecclesiology.

There have been many programs developed in our church, which emphasize mission (for example, 1000 Days of Harvest, Harvest 90, Global Mission Pioneers, and,

most recently, Total Member Involvement). The SDA Church has been quite active in creating and implementing robust mission programs, and as a result, over 33 millions of people were baptized into this church in the last 50 years. However, according to the official records, 13 millions (39%) of them have left (Bryant 2016:35). What were the reasons? Was it because of a teaching they agreed to prior to their baptism or was it because of their concern about the quality of church life? Was it perhaps the lack of experiencing the reality of the Triune God they were baptized (literally immersed) into?¹

This study explores the recent missiological and ecclesiological discussion as it relates to the wellbeing of the Church; this is considered in light of an analysis of Trinitarian text in Matthew 28:19 and major themes of 1 John. “The concept of the Trinity is simply too foundational, too essential, too Biblical, and finally too precious” not just “to the very nature of our understanding of God” (Whidden 2002:280), but also to our understanding of church and her mission.

Both Volf and Hill share their surprise about finding out the link between Trinitarian communion and ecclesial communion was not much examined, as understanding of the Trinity will definitely have an impact on our theological thinking (Volf 1997:191-220; Hill 2012:138). Trinitarian themes have become rather abstract and removed from the concrete realities of church life.

Just think, what would change in our practice should the Trinity have to be dropped as false doctrine? “We should not discount the relevance and implications of Trinitarian theology for our understanding of the church” (Hill 2012:232). Recent research indicates a more thorough and deeper understanding of Godhead is essential to just about everything the church values.

“Baptized in the name . . .” (Matt 28:19)

A lot has been said and written about the Great Commission. As Seventh-day Adventists, we take Jesus’ final command seriously. In a recent analysis of a vast number of surveys collected by Natural Church Development International, a comparison was made between Adventists and other Christians. Among the items that stood out as the greatest strengths of Adventists were two statements related to Great Commission: “I pray for my friends, colleagues, and relatives who do not yet know Jesus Christ that they will come to faith,” and “I try to deepen my relationship with people who do not yet know Jesus Christ.” Winning people for Christ is very dear to us as Adventists.

We also understand that baptism is not a solitary affair, but rather a communal act. “Baptism marks our birth into the family of God. This is the context where I am made a disciple” (Chester & Timmis 2008:112). It is striking that of the three tasks of Great Commission – making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them – baptism is linked with the three persons of God, and it is through baptism the new believer is incorporated into the church to start their journey of faith (Andiñach 2014:45-46).

We believe in the Biblical form of baptism by immersion. To be baptized is as if someone was closed in a casket for a moment and died. But then, in a moment, they come out, alive, but in a different way – with a clean record, relieved from all ailments (Rom

¹ (For more on this topic, see Retention and Reclamation: A Priority of the World Church by David Trim, the Director of Archives, Statistics and Research at <https://www.adventistarchives.org/ac2015-retention-report.pdf>)

6:1-10), to live a new life in Jesus. Baptism represents the beginning of a new reality with God's worldview installed into our operating system. We are symbolically immersed in God's reality, dying to our former ways of life.

Baptism according to Jesus was to be done "in the name of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). We understand that in the times of Jesus, a name referred to a character, personality, and nature or an authority. Could we say that through baptism, disciples were immersed into God's character so they could reflect that character in their lives? What exactly is Jesus' expression referring to?

When John describes the qualities of Christian life in his first pastoral letter, he repeatedly uses an expression born "of God" (1 John 3:9,10; 4:4,6,7; 5:1,4,18). He also repeatedly mentions we should remain "in God" (1 John 2:5,6,27,28; 3:24; 4:13,15,16). What exactly is he talking about? Is he referring to the same thing as we read in Matthew 28:19?

The baptismal formula in Matt 28:19 emphasizes the three persons of God, and yet we are baptized in one name. What exactly does it say about God's character, nature, and values? There is one God in the Bible – that is a fundamental confession of faith. There are no other gods, and if we enter into a living relationship with God, we do not have nor create other gods (Deut 6:4; Ex 20:3; Mark 12:29). Yet Jesus speaks of God as of three persons. There are other places in the Bible where God presents Himself in plural (Gen 1:26; 11:7; Isa 6:8). How can we interpret the fact that one God is three persons in reality?

It is a known fact that the number three is an important Biblical number. For example, God called Samuel three times (1 Sam 3:2-14); God is "holy, holy, holy" (Isa 6:3); Jesus was tempted three times in the desert (Matt 4:1-4); Jesus three times foretold His suffering (Matt 16:21; 17:12,22,23; 20:17-19); on the third day, Jesus came out from the tomb (1 Cor. 15:4); three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him (John 21:15-17); the list could go on and on. The number three in the Biblical world conveys completion, perfection, and also implies relationship. The perfect God who is complete and self-sufficient exists in *three* persons, all who relate to each other.

The next section of this paper focuses on 1 John. In this fairly short letter (approximately 2500 words), John speaks a lot about God. He frequently refers to each of the three divine Persons in particular (Father – 12 times; Son – 22 times; Spirit – 7 times). He also refers to Christ (24 times) and to Jesus (13 times). In an attempt to provide some answers to questions raised above, we explore the dynamics of this brief letter.

Love, Light, and Truth (1 John)

Through three persons, God presents Himself as the God of relationships. That is why John claimed, "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). Interestingly, "God" (64 times), "is" (103 times), and "love" (46 times) are the most frequently-used words in 1 John. According to John, love does not exist without relating well to one another (1 John 3:17; 4:20).

John starts his epistle (similar to his Gospel) with a reference to the beginning (perhaps echoing Gen 1:1) of God's plans with this earth (1 John 1:1). Some Christians like to call God's original plan with humans the Story of Redemption. Long before our world was created, the Godhead met and roles were assigned to each of the three "team"

members. The plan of One (Jesus) becoming the Messiah was laid out so that under every possible circumstance, God could continue to give life not only as the Creator, but also as a Redeemer

In the beginning, they (the Godhead) created humans to rejoice in fellowship with each other, the new extended family of the Godhead. He created us in His image (Gn 1:26). Because of this, loving community allows us to pour out His/Their love on those around us. God made us in such a way that we could love Them and love one another, thus mirroring His love.

We have, however, fallen out of loving harmony with God, and sin has become our reality. John repeatedly warns us in his epistle not to sin. One of his primary concerns is that we overcome sin (in the brief letter we find 28 references to sin). But how can we do that? His advice is twofold: 1. Admit you are sinner. If you claim you are not, you are a liar, fooling yourself (1 John 1:8,10; 2:4,9; 4:20). 2. Focus on loving God and loving others (1 John 3:14,18; 4:7-12,19-21; 5:2-3), not on loving the world or idols (2:15-17; 3:1,13; 4:3-5; 5:21).

The frequency test of key words used in 1 John reveals another insight. When John speaks of God or when he addresses the readers, he uses family terms (son – 22 times; brother – 15 times; children – 14 times; father – 12 times; dear – 6 times). Less than every 20th word in John's epistle is a term that comes from a family/community circle and is relational/interpersonal. John writes this epistle as an old man and in this epistle, he appears to summarize the most essential principles of being Christian believer.

John also describes God as a light (1 John 1:5). The same as God Himself is light and God is in the light, so we should walk in the light (1:7). According to John, to walk in light means to walk with God and to love others (1 John 2:8,10). Dwelling in the light means having a fellowship with God and one another, to bond and relate well with each other.

John clearly wants to make a sharp distinction of God's reality versus that of the world, so he repeatedly uses contrasts: love versus hate; love versus fear; light versus darkness. This is also how he uses the term "truth:" truth versus lies. When he refers to the term "truth" (11 times), he speaks primarily in terms of practical life. We should live by the truth (1:6), truth should be seen in us (2:8), we should know the truth (2:21). One asks whether John had in mind Jesus' words "I am the Truth" (John 14:6) when he uttered that we "belong to truth." Again, his concern was that we do not love merely by lip service, but by "actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence" (1 John 3:17-19). Truth versus lies is a matter of lifestyle rather than a matter of merely correct/incorrect information.

Knowledge is also important. The verb "to know" is actually one of the most frequently used verbs in John's epistle (41 times). He does not seem to refer to fundamental/distinct beliefs as we are used to. He only expands his major concept of love and light as opposed to hatred, fear, and darkness. Knowing God means to love Him and have an intimate, personal relationship with Him (1 John 2:4). Knowledge of truth is helpful/makes sense/brings life only in the context of love and the Spirit because the "Spirit is the truth" (1 John 5:6). John's argument throughout the epistle regarding the quality of Christian life is overwhelmingly relational.

Ecclesiological Implications

Love is essentially a mutual virtue. Love requires at least two or three people to be activated. Could love exist without relating well to one another? Not according to John. The Triune God exists in perfect harmony due to love and unity. In other words, God – made up of three persons – are loving each other, and thus are a source of love for the whole universe. Not only is God a social being, He is a community in and of itself. To be “in God” means to love one another as God loves one another.

It is therefore no coincidence that the word “church” in the original language means “community” (Matt 16:18), and that God’s presence can be most fully experienced in a setting where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:19-20). Disciples are to live in community; Christians cannot live in independence and isolation. To experience ecclesia in its original meaning, the church is expressed through community, and through giving and receiving. Christians are to live “from and towards others” (Volf 1997:206). Such a community “demonstrates the love, mutual interpenetration, and communion of the Trinity” (Hill 2012:139).

God created humans in His image, and it would be very difficult to argue that He would not want His church to function in His image. “The church is formed in the image of the Trinity and participates in the rich relationships of the triune God” (2012:144). The same as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “exist in and for each other, in a relationship of intersubjectivity, mutuality, and reciprocity” (2012:233), so are to live the beneficiaries of the communion of love and intimacy between the persons of the Godhead.

Here we find a new meaning to the practical implications of the Triune God. Love is not an enhancement or bonus to His existence; it is fundamental and inseparable to His being. Therefore, “the interior life of the Trinity can help us understand the nature and potential of communion among God’s people. The love, intimacy, unity and embrace of the members of the Trinity provide a model or analogy for the church” (2012:234).

The quality and health of our church lives may well depend on our ability to act upon what we know and understand about God. To live in the light and the truth of the Triune God, the church’s fellowship must reflect the Trinitarian relations – loving, unified, reciprocal, mutual, free, and yet interdependent (2012:260). The Spirit plays key importance in this process. Love and all the other virtues resulting from love are nothing but His fruit (Gal 5:22). Moreover, His gifts are given to the church – the body of Christ makes God’s transforming love powerfully present (1 Cor 12:4-10; Rom 12:4-9; Eph 4:7-12).

The Triune God in Action

So far we have explored the dynamics of the relationship within the Godhead and its ecclesiological implications. However, this is only one side of a coin. If God is a community, how does it play out in His actions? How do the dynamics described earlier affect His leadership? When Jesus said to the disciples “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go . . .” (Matt 28:18-19), was He talking on His own behalf, or on behalf of the three persons? What is the credibility of the Triune God as a leader?

We know from Scripture that each member of the Trinity has been involved in God’s action (Hill 2012: 239). It was true in the beginning when our world was created. God the Father set forth the idea, Jesus the Word executed the plan, and the Spirit filled

the new created space with God's presence. As a group, They invested Their collective attention to the creative process "to allow for the fullest potential of group creativity" (Bowers 2016:xy).

And it did not stop there. God's Trinity has had characteristics, roles, and functions throughout the history of implementing plan of salvation (Hill 2012:231). God the Father expressed His love by sending His Son to die for us (John 3:16) so that the Son could speak to the Father in our defense (1 John 2:1), and the Spirit could testify the truth by making God's union evident (1 John 3:24; 4:13; 5:6).

We also find the evidence of "sending" nature (*Missio Dei*) of the Triune God (Bosch 1991; Hill 2012:230). The Father himself sent, the Son was sent and sent, and the Spirit was sent. Each member of the Trinity is uniquely involved in missional action (Hill 2012:239). The differences in the roles of Father, Son and Spirit are rather complementary. We know the Father through His Son (John 17:3), and the Holy Spirit enables that knowledge in us (John 15:26; 16:13-15).

There is a deep underlying unity that "characterizes their mission as they are 'in' one another and they are one (John 10:30, 38; 14:10-11)" (Köstenberger & Swain 2008:19-20). Their identities have been bound together in "a profound and mutually determining way" (21).

God's Trinity is an equal team. We find Them submitting to each other without any hint of establishing power over each other. Jesus submits all to the feet of His Father (1 Cor. 15:24). The Father submits all to the feet of Christ (Eph. 1:17-23), and the Spirit bows before Them and intercedes for us (Rom 8:26,27). Their unity in being, will, and work are equally affirmed in the Bible.

The loving Triune God in action therefore has the following attributes:

- It exemplifies group creativity.
 - It has three distinct personal identities.
 - These three identities complement each other.
 - The identities are sending in nature.
 - The three identities demonstrate unity in being, will and work.
 - Each identity helps make an equal team.
- The Triune God displays mutual submission.

Missiological Implications

God loved us so that we can love; Jesus was sent so that He could send us. "The triunity of Father, Son, and Spirit forms the paradigm and basis for the love and unity among Jesus' followers and for their mission to the world as they represent His message and follow their Lord" (Köstenberger & Swain 2008:43). Before Jesus said, "Therefore go", He provided sufficient example. He also promised to be with us "to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).

The issues our church presently deals with appear to signal that the mission of the church and the missional work we are called into have been misunderstood. Yes, we have mission programs and a mission-focused emphasis; however, yet, mission is merely one of the programs of the church. One wonders what would our church look like today "if it were truly missional in design and definition" (Guder & Barrett 1998:6-7).

What is our motivation for mission? Is it sense of duty, spiritual pride, “fear” of the Lord, or is it God’s love? Now, if it is truly love, why are loving relationships one of the weakest qualities in our church? If there is anything else other than “God’s action in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Snyder & Runyon 2002:127) as the key to understanding mission, then something is not right. The more we know the Triune God in our hearts, the more we have a passion for Their [the Trinity’s] work in the world, not just for the Church and her needs (125).

Ultimately, mission is the work of all three persons of Godhead for the sake of the world; it is a privilege for the church to participate in it (Hegstad 2013:83). Mission is inseparable from God. The sending activity and the missional nature of loving God “are the source of the church’s mission. The Father sends Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit and the Trinity sends the church missionally into the world” (Hill 2012:231). Trinitarian theology drives missional ecclesiology (2012:144; Snyder & Runyon 2002:54). Missional ecclesiology is Biblical, historical, contextual, and eschatological (Guder & Barrett 1998:11-12).

Such ecclesiology is conceived relationally rather than hierarchically. Leaders strive to serve and submit rather than to build hierarchy and express themselves oppressively (Hill 2012:240-241); this is because the Trinity operates in a fashion that is the opposite of a hierarchy (Snyder & Runyon 2002:56). Should the church take the Triune God seriously and grow into His image, it will function more as a complex organism rather than rational organization or a social machine (56).

Yes, institutions and institutionalized procedures are an inevitable part of church life, but they should aim to be empowering, participative, serving, community-centered, and polycentric (Hill 2012:141). Not all hierarchy is necessarily constraining. “Within every form of church polity there are those who seek a Trinitarian balance between functional and institutional authority on the one hand, and genuine collegiality, mutuality and equality on the other” (Hill 2012:241). Thus, the various parts and diverse layers/regions of the church may mutually complement, affirm, and enrich. The local churches can strive by creatively collaborating together (Volf 1997:207).

If we take God’s communion and mission adequately, local churches would definitely help to remedy the diminishing social cohesion in our surrounding communities. The local churches would be known for its hospitality, justice, peace, and reconciliation (Hill 2012:255). The forms of the church would reflect the Triune God by sufficient flexibility, creativity, innovation, and yet intentionality, complementarity and simplicity in the context of world that is increasingly multicultural, rapidly changing and diverse (Volf 1997:21; Hill 2012:143).

Practical Application (The Trinitarian Compass)

Believing in the Triune God has serious implications. It is challenging and requires profound examination of both personal and congregational values and practices. We will either accept God’s love and allow it to become our driving force, or we will tend to shy away from the light of His love, operating in shade if not darkness. Our mission will either be holistic, compassionate, and practical, or selective, partial, and ineffective.

As mentioned earlier, we may experience the Triune God-like loving community among ourselves when we walk in light, not in darkness (1 John 1:5-7; 4:9-20). Jesus

“the light the world” (John 8:12) called us to be “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). “Light” in 1 John is almost interchangeable with word “love.” How can we grow in love to be a brighter light? How can we grow to be more like Him? Is there a way to measure such a growth?

Schwarz points out that it is “no coincidence the first thing God created was light (Gen 1:3)” (2004:49-50). God wants us to walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Schwarz also reminds us that light is made of three self-luminous colors. He suggests that God – who is Himself light – operates in three persons as though each would represent one illuminating color. What makes God love is that He lives in a community of three. What makes God light is that He represents three colors of light. It takes three colors to have a beautiful colorful picture, and it takes three colors to have a shining light in which there is no darkness (1 John 1:5).

The Trinitarian Compass is an assessment tool or a guide that shows how people relate to the Trinity (Schwarz 2004:44-79). Each member of the Godhead is represented by a specific color: green, red, and blue. Each color reveals a different aspect of the One True God. Spiritual balance is attained when each of these color dynamics is in balance with the other two. This is a gradual and continuous process. The desired outcome is to bring all colors up to the strongest aspect while maintaining balance.

Green represents God as our Creator. This color reveals God through creation. It encompasses the covenant God made to mankind through Noah. Because we were all created and enjoy God’s creation, this color reflects “tolerance and social justice” (Schwarz 2004:47). Red represents Jesus Christ our Savior (51). This dimension focuses on evangelism and discipleship, or sharing and receiving the gospel (2009:22). Blue is more affective in nature. It represents the Holy Spirit and the personal encounters people have with Him. The focus here is on emotional health and spiritual power (2004:47).

The personal assessment through the Trinitarian Compass aims to provide a glimpse of where we are spiritually in understanding, reflecting, and relating to God. It encourages us to be radically passionate, while maintaining balance in all three dimensions (2009:16-18). Growing in a balanced manner while maintaining spiritual passion for growth is essential to building faith. The compass serves not only to reveal the condition of spiritual life, but also to show believer a direction towards increased intimacy with Jesus (2004:135-137).

The Trinitarian Compass is a practical method of understanding how Christians can relate to a Triune God. The tool can be used for individual Christians as well as for entire congregations. The Trinitarian Compass is not a doctrine, but rather a tool to measure how we reflect loving God in our lives. We need to be careful, however, not to even attempt to simplify God into three colors or put Him into boxes of any kind. It is important for Christians to understand that this tool is for measuring and planning for spiritual growth; it is not designed to model and explain how the members of the Trinity relate to each other. The contribution of this tool is to provide assessment beyond intellectual knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to review possible implications of the Biblical teaching of Trinity in the life of believers, as well as congregations. Whenever someone becomes a Christian and joins the church, the person is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the *Father* and with his *Son*, Jesus Christ . . . We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his *Spirit*’ (1 John 1:3; 4:13). There are number of both ecclesiological and missiological implications of this reality.

The Church is God’s community and should reflect the community of the Triune God in her relationships, priorities, actions, and in her missional involvement. God’s love translates into His missional nature. God is proactive, creating, and caring – and He expects no less from us. As we have seen, communion and mission are inseparable in the Triune God and in His church. In view of this study about the practical implications of following the Triune God it is apparent we need to pay more attention to missional ecclesiology, both in diligent study of the theological, as well as practical implications and in appropriate actions.

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