

Approaching Prison Ministry through the Doctrine of the Trinity

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The Doctrine of the Trinity facilitates best practices within prison ministry

There are significant challenges facing incarcerated people, which can seem overwhelming for those working within prison ministry. Among those challenges is overcoming the obstacles of shame, guilt, and social ostracization that plague the incarcerated. Additional challenges include the difficulty of daily prison life dominated by gangs and spiritual warfare.

Finally, re-entering society after incarceration poses recidivism risks and social hurdles. By approaching prison ministry through the Doctrine of the Trinity, volunteers, and service providers are energized and can provide focused reliance on the most fundamental tenets of Christianity. As David Litwa says in *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture*, "The whole Trinity is the essence of divinity, and the whole Trinity is the energy of divinity."

Differing Positions of the Doctrine

In *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Wayne Grudem says, "The Doctrine of Trinity is one of the most important Doctrines of the Christian faith." The Trinity existed before creation. When Jesus speaks, "*my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world*" (John 17:24), recognizing the relationships of the love between the Father and the Son and Christ's reciprocal love to the Father in John 14:31 with that love characterizing the role of the Holy Spirit. Grudem notes that self-giving is a primary characteristic of the Trinity. Self-giving finds expression in God's relationship to humankind "*In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning*

sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Here is hope for all humanity, but especially for sinful men. The Trinity contains all the attributes of God.

There are two primary differences regarding the Doctrine of the Trinity within Christian beliefs, of which one represents: 1) Christian Trinitarianism, and the other 2) Non-Trinitarianism (Arianism).

1. Trinitarianism – believes that God is three distinct persons who are entirely God in One. Emphasizing the separate distinctions – God the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit, and The Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Scripture informs us, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God"* (John 1:1-2).
2. Non-Trinitarian Christian beliefs – Arianism separates the Logos from the Son of God, reorders Christ's creation as secondary and subordinate to God, and views the Holy Spirit as a powerful force but not equal to God. A product of Arius of Alexandria Egypt (c. 256-336), the Doctrine was considered heretical by the first two ecumenical councils. This Doctrine believes that Christ was begotten in time by God and is not coeternal or consubstantial with God. There are many variants of this Doctrine, but some churches that adhere to these beliefs are Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Author's Position on the Doctrine

When we look at the immensity of God in our natural surroundings, how can we connect his essence to the many shapes and forms that surround us? Exploring what makes up the Trinity can help us see these relationships.

Grudem defines "the doctrine of the Trinity as follows: God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."

The Trinity is God, The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and exists in the form of three coeternal and consubstantial persons. The Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in either the Old or New Testament. However, its adumbration (the process of shadowing forth) occurs in the Old Testament. Moreover, Paul presents a decisive view of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. As Clinton Arnold says in his book *Ephesians*, "Throughout Ephesians, all three persons are represented as working closely together with different roles in actualizing the plan of redemption. There are eleven passages in Ephesians that portray the harmonious yet differentiated work of the Father, Son, and the Spirit."

The presence of the Trinity in both books is undeniable. Still, God chose to reveal the Trinity directly to humanity in the New Testament when we learn that God has a Son whom he sent with The Holy Spirit, who was purposely sent to humankind in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the Jewish prayer, the Shema (Deut. 6:4), is the basis for the Jewish belief of monotheism "states God is One." The word 'one' in Hebrew is 'Echad,' which more precisely means 'a single entity' but made up of more than one part. The meaning is exemplified in Gen. 1:5 when 'one day is comprised of two things' darkness and light, or Gen. 2:24. The name Elohim, which is plural, is applied to two different personalities (Psalms 45:6-7). The 'Lord' is used twice in Gen. 19:24, referring to one Lord on earth and one Lord in heaven – both understood as Yahweh. The Trinity is openly revealed but not stated explicitly in the New Testament in many passages, revealing how God is one essence in three forms. As Douglas Moo says in *Romans: The NIV Application Commentary*, "Only the doctrine of the Trinity can account for the claims made in all these texts."

Application in Prison Ministry

Those serving within Prison Ministry recognize that the incarcerated need strong role models, no-nonsense life philosophies, and trusted information to rehabilitate their lives. Most people become incarcerated due to substance abuse and related crimes surrounding their addictions. It is safe to say that almost all those incarcerated came from unstable or traumatic childhoods lacking positive parent role models and solid cultural ethics. Additional factors include socio-economic conditions of poverty and poor education. Within 1) Legends, 2) Non-fiction, and 3) Data, ministers can best situate their scriptural approach by applying the Doctrine of the Trinity to these categories. Thus Christian ministers may be confident that they have utilized a thorough approach to ministering to the incarcerated. The abundant scriptural evidence is available to equip ministers interested in applying the Trinitarian Doctrine to the unique and diverse problems of those incarcerated.

God the Father & Legends

Legends function as larger-than-life role models that serve as personal leaders for those who came from unstable families and were exposed to difficult life situations in their past. Prisoners are sometimes drawn to legends due to their extraordinary accomplishments. Two examples of legends within the Doctrine of the Trinity are God the Father and Jesus Christ. Nothing and no one can compare to their Holy actions. God's legendary love and mercy offer humankind a lifelong promise of forgiveness for their sins. Christ's legendary sacrifice offers humanity redemption and eternal life through "the narrow gate."

Prisoners are often more lost inside prison walls than outside of them. Without the purpose of crime to fill the time, the minutes become hours, and the hours become days. The Doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that the true purpose of humankind is to glorify God. Ministers can guide the incarcerated toward a better heroic legend that offers eternal blessings in

their lives, not the temporary gifts of materialism. God's love is eternal and timeless. As Michael Lawrence says in *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, "The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. Love is bound into the very nature of the Trinity. God cannot be God without love, because God is love." The incarcerated need only offer their love in worship to God to commute the empty, monotonous slippage of time, "*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (1 John 4:8). It is Father God who will bring divine justice to bear on their lives, as they learn to wait on his unfolding plan.

Prison gangs attempt to induce fear in prisoners to strengthen their numbers. Teaching prisoners the wisdom of fearing the Lord instead (Ex. 20:20) changes the power dynamic away from gangs and back to a reliance on God.

Jesus Christ & Non-fiction

Prisoners are searching for concrete and reliable methods to improve their lives. Many of them are incarcerated for decades and become more deeply inculcated into gangs within the prison. They need solid, definable non-fiction to guide them toward the certainty of God's love (Mark 12:30). Prisoners often suffer from having a childhood where they were unloved from birth. Prisoners can rely on the loving relationships within the Trinity (John 17:24). God the Father and Jesus Christ are non-fiction realities – not fairy-tale fantasies or myths. Ministers can reveal that the rock upon which we build our life is Christ, who offers a love that is perfect, complete, tangible, and sustaining.

Prisoners also suffer the shame of guilt and believe it is impossible to be forgiven. Christ, The Son is the mediator and advocates to God the Father for those who have sinned. "If any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (John 2:1). Prisoners suffer from hopelessness as their past haunts them and their future is unformed. Christ

understands their suffering and, as Grudem states, has "in his person and his words the role of communicating the character of God to us and of expressing the will of God for us."

The Holy Spirit and Data

Prisoners are disproportionately people of color. This issue is often due to structural problems in our society that segregate nationalities due to income and low education. The incarcerated must understand the data surrounding these issues to understand their heightened vulnerability toward crime (sin). All humankind is vulnerable to sin regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic status. The seeds of sin lay within our hearts. The Bible, not a Twitter post or gang rules, provides the "correct data" by which we live. Christianity is inclusive of all nationalities with exclusive rules. It offers hope, redemption, salvation, and eternal life for those who have fallen.

Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to attend to the needs of humanity in his absence (John 16:7). Prisoners can be taught new ways of thinking and living that will prepare in them a new heart attitude and strengthen them during their incarceration, "*But the Advocate, the **Holy Spirit**, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you*" (John 14:26).

The sheer impact of the prison walls themselves further daunts prisoners. Sometimes it is all they can see. Nevertheless, ministers can help the incarcerated understand that the Holy Spirit is there for them – though unseen. "*Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy*" (1 Peter 1:8).

Finally, the psychological effects of imprisonment can create breeding grounds for Satan's work. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, lifts prisoners through teaching, bearing witness,

interceding, and distributing gifts (John 15:26, Rom. 8:26-27, 1 Cor. 12:11) so that the incarcerated may "put on the whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:11) and protect themselves from the spiritual warfare which is widespread in prisons. Melissa Spoelstra says in *The Names of God*, "It is God who enables us...to stand firm for Christ. He has commissioned us, and he has identified us as his own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the first installment that guarantees everything he has promised us."

Conclusion

Working through the Doctrine of the Trinity in prison ministry provides straightforward methods for walking beside individuals at every stage of their incarceration to their eventual release. Ministers need to keep the entire Trinity in mind while serving the incarcerated. Sidney Greidanus, in his book *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, quotes Johann Le Roux that "every sermon should bear witness to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as the one singular God, who while being one, is at the same time three distinguishable Persons." The emotional and spiritual needs of those incarcerated will undoubtedly shift, but helping them to build their faith in Christ provides a stable rock on which they can depend and grow emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, and socially. The Doctrine of the Trinity reveals key scriptural opportunities to heal and reform sinners.