

One New Book for the Preacher

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THESE THREE ARE ONE: THE PRACTICE OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY
by David S. Cunningham. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 1998. 368 pages.

This elegantly simple book will delight those preachers who avoid preaching on the Trinity because it is just too mysterious. Cunningham acknowledges that most theology texts are “*painfully boring*,” and seeks to make his interesting to the reader and pertinent to the parish minister’s work. To that end, he seeks to make connections between the Trinity as a doctrine of faith and the practices of the ministry and the Church: preaching and liturgy, prayer, social justice, and peacemaking.

Cunningham likes to refer to the Trinity as Source, Wellspring, and Living Water. Immediately some will question this language, but I urge them to read his analysis and explanation of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity before making judgments. Cunningham manages to explain the technicalities of the doctrine without losing the reader in the details. In that explanation, he claims that Trinitarian thought is more about relationships than entities; the “three persons” of the Trinity, he argues, describe three relationships within God. Father and Son, he suggests, are words that tell more about the relationship than about the two persons who are in relation. It is our individualistic way of thinking which leads us to think more of the three “endpoints” than the relationships, of nouns rather than verbs. In analyzing what is meant by Father and Son and Spirit, he uses analogies of pregnancy and childbirth which are insightful, but which do not do full justice to the Godhead. It is better, he believes, to use the analogy of a spring that pours forth water. All of the relationships within God can be described as Source, Wellspring, and Living Water.

The three parts of the book correspond to these three relationships, with Source being Trinitarian Beliefs; while Wellspring brings Trinitarian Virtues; and Living Water, Trinitarian Practices. The first of these includes the analysis of relationships, and of creating, producing, and issuing forth as the acts of God in the world. Here we have the technical material and the history of the doctrine.

In the second section of the book, Trinitarian Virtues, Cunningham offers polyphony, participation, and particularity as three values which inform the life of the Christian and the Church. Polyphony is “many voices”; here he compares theology and worship to music, in which many sounds are heard at once with a pleasing affect. The voices to which he listens deal with creation and redemption, with ways of reading the scripture, with issues of power and control. He includes here a reading of Dostoyevsky, to show that literature offers us many voices of interpretation, a resource for preaching and teaching.

Cunningham understands participation and particularity as two sides of the same coin, illustrating that we exist in community but as unique persons. Participation critiques “individualism run amok” with a vision of mutual participation in God, of our participation with God and one another, and the various concrete ways in which the

fellowship of the Church offers us a place in which to live and worship. Particularity assures that our uniqueness is secured, but is so within the vision of the Trinity, wherein particular persons are nevertheless fully one. We find our particularity is our identity, not as isolated individuals, but rather as an identity that is given to us within and by the community that shapes and forms us.

The third part of the book is “Trinitarian Practices.” Here, under the headings *peacemaking*, *pluralizing*, and *persuading*, Cunningham seeks to fully demonstrate how the beliefs and virtues of Trinitarian faith lead and lend themselves to practice. Peacemaking takes its cue from the Godhead, in which differences co-exist in full harmony with others. Cunningham in this section offers solid material for the preacher on the violence of Genesis 1-11. He turns to the Eucharist, to stewardship of creation, to the concept of time as content for the Church as a “school for peace.”

By pluralizing, Cunningham means an acceptance of a variety of styles and voices in our life together. He has some creative suggestions about how we view family life, offering the idea that the Church be seen as our family, a family composed of people from many and variously differing homes. Pluralizing also suggests more openness to the body than the traditional theology has tolerated, and here he raises issues of gender and sexuality. Cunningham ends the section with persuading, where we consider issues of power and authority, from baptism to capital punishment. Here again he seeks to connect the ways we act and the things we do in practice with the beliefs we profess in the creed.

What has Cunningham accomplished? Some will argue with him on technical points; his version of Trinitarian doctrine rests heavily on Aquinas. Some will find the nine-part structure somewhat contrived. Everyone will find some point with which to argue when he discusses our practices and the values that underlie and support them. And in that argument, Cunningham will have achieved his aim: to get preachers and others thinking once again about arcane matters of doctrine and to bring those faith commitments to bear on real questions that concern us day by day.

Protagonist Corner

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When the call comes you have to answer. Yes or no; there is no maybe. When the committee came, in their obvious seeking awkwardness, an answer was required. I asked for time to discuss it and pray about it with my spouse and my support community. Without really understanding what the job entailed, and trusting in the committee and my understanding of how calls come, with the support of all of the above, I said yes to being a candidate for an at large position on the City of Little Rock Board of Directors.

Having been as politically active as any traditional, southern, yellow dog Presbyterian minister, I thought I understood the process. I had done voter registration in the rural South. I had faced the dogs, fire hoses, and deputy sheriffs during the civil rights movement; the 82nd Airborne and the Washington, D.C. Park Police, the batons, and the tear gas during the peace movement. I had lived with the Sandanistas in Nicaragua, dug bomb shelters in my back yard, heard the Contras blow up nearby bridges, and lived through soccer riots in Rio and Edinburgh. But I have never feared for my soul as I did during what became known as the campaign. I had taken the step from faithfulness into sales. I was no longer a minister, I was the candidate; no longer a preacher but a pitchman.

The first thing was to raise money, the very heart of the message. The campaign manager handed me a list of the important "gatekeepers" in the community. The point was to visit with them and have them give me a blessing that would open up money and votes.

The problem was they were people I would not visit with when I was an ordinary person. These were the people of power who had caused most of the problems in the city in the first place. Now I was to sell a piece of my soul and visit these very people. Without the money, I could not win, and it is a question of winning and power.

The second thing was to go to house parties given by people who would invite their friends and those who might be interested in supporting (again, with money) and working in the campaign. These are political Amway parties. *I* was the product to be sold. When I asked about the issues, the campaign people said, "It's not the issues, it's *you*."

The candidate walks into a room filled with anywhere from five to forty people and begins to sell. I am this, I am that. I stand for this and I stand for that. But most of all, look at me and see that I am just like you and will make sure that your neighborhood and your concerns will have an advocate on the board of directors. If you accept all of this, you can put a sign in your yard, call your friends, and give money. The offering plate is on the table.

So, not only am I asked to sell a piece of my soul, but suddenly there is no privacy. No piece of my life is mine. Every family story, every piece of personal history, every dream is used for money and for votes.

The third thing was to go to the meetings of neighborhood associations and groups like unions and professional associations. In many ways this is like visiting the medieval city-states of Italy. Each one seems to have its own dictator to whom you paid homage.

Paying homage means letting them put you in your place and threaten you with their power. The candidates respond in both words and body language: "See what a good person I am; I will let you abuse me and still I will flatter you because you have power and I have none except what you give to me. Please give your blessings, your vote, and your money." So, not only do you sell your soul and give up your privacy; you also demean yourself.

Finally, you get to have *people*, as in "my people will get in touch with your people." At the beginning of the campaign you set up a campaign committee composed of friends, those people you trust and of whom you are part. You look to them for advice and for the reality check that is so necessary in a campaign.

As the campaign grows, they begin to create their own bases of power: the organizer of volunteers, the phone banker, the money raiser; each thinks his or her own part of the campaign is most important for victory. The candidate is no longer a friend but the one to be manipulated to enhance a part of the process. The candidate is no longer a person but the center of a mass of energy and activity that takes on a life of its own. There is now no reality beyond the campaign.

So, not only do you sell your soul, give up your privacy, demean yourself, but you also lose your community.

As bad as all that sounds, the adrenaline rush, the strokes to the ego, and the power become addictive, and only at three o'clock in the morning is there an indication that maybe this is not right. But then there is the computer printout of your schedule lying on your desk at 7:00 a. m. and your day job has to be taken care of as well—there is no time to really think those three o'clock in the morning thoughts.

The three o'clock in the morning thought that keeps coming back, even at other times, is that those who enjoy campaigning are not fit to govern. One candidate spent close to \$100,000 in the race after being threatened by a speculator, "if you get elected you better enjoy it because we will never let you get reelected" (little did he know that this was a one time thing). After selling my soul, giving up my privacy, demeaning myself, losing my community, I lost the election. Reformed theology calls that providential care.

The startling thing about this experience is not what I learned about the political system but what I learned about ministry: in our affluent cultural exile, ministry and candidacy are synonymous.

How much pressure is put upon us, as ministers, to raise the money that is necessary to maintain the institution. We need the copy machine, the janitor, the computer, the organist, the machines, and people; we forget the difference as we struggle to raise the money to support the institution. We give position to those who should not have it because of the check that will come in the mail. We sell our soul to meet the budget and keep the institution going.

How much pressure is put upon individual members to give up their privacy. I have come to worship God, and I am greeted with good morning. I earnestly want to receive the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I am greeted with, "Hi, I'm Molly. Welcome to our congregation." I want to be in the presence of God, and instead I must share my

life's story and hear about the feelings of others I do not even know.

We give up our privacy, the very spirituality that the masses so desire, to sell the institution so that there will be money to keep it going.

How much pressure is put upon the governing body of a congregation by those whose power is more important than the well being of the church. The vast majority of the community's energy is spent dealing with the loudest folks, while humble folk get the hind most.

We demean ourselves and the congregation in order to keep the institution on an even keel, losing our inner self so that we can sell it so that there will be money to keep it going.

How much pressure is put upon the individual minister to be a celebrity. Pastor Tom or Mary or the Rev. Dr. Smith becomes not the minister but the product offered for sale, the charismatic personality cult leader, not asking the people to drink poison kool-aid, but asking them to die of thirst. For the water that is offered is empty of any sustenance, and there is no one to draw the living water from the well.

We worship the personality, demean ourselves, lose our inner self, sell ourselves so that there is money to keep the institution going. This is the model of the CEO, the therapist, the pitchman with which the world is most comfortable because it effects the least change in the kingdom of the world.

The difference between being a minister, who walks behind the sacred desk, either in the classroom or the sanctuary and a politician who is always before the people is that the minister is a part of the whole. I do not walk into the pulpit by myself. I am pushed by those who have gone before me and pulled by those who will come after. The power is not mine either to possess or direct; it is the Spirit who comes and goes like the wind. And winning is losing.

Jesus' first sermon, "Repent and believe that the Kingdom of God is before us," makes us very political animals. We jealously live out our citizenship in the world serving those whom Jesus served and enjoying those whom he enjoyed. Never is it a question of winning, for power is in losing, and our office is with the least.

As I said, those who enjoy campaigning are not fit to govern, just as those who campaign for power and position in the institutional church are not fit to minister. What my experience in the campaign has taught me is that those who gain their soul, lose it, and those who lose it gain life.

When the call comes, and it always does, it is difficult to discern it in this affluent exile. The kingdom of this world sells a beautiful form of death, and the Kingdom of God gives a difficult form of life. The church and her ministers, however, are called not to sell it or run for it, but to *be* the Kingdom in this world.