

“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”
A Study Paper Received by the 217th General Assembly of the PCUSA
An Overview

1. The primary aim of this report is “to help our church renew its faith in the triune God” (90). For many Christians, including many Presbyterians, the doctrine of the Trinity is not only dark and confusing; it is also without practical significance for everyday Christian faith and life. This Report has as its aim to help members of our churches find once again in this central doctrine of Christian faith “good and joyful news” (74). It is good and joyful news because it is a description of the God of the gospel, the triune God who has created us in sovereign love, who has saved us by the costly grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and who sanctifies us by the power of the Holy Spirit, drawing us into the new life of communion with God and each other (140-143).

2. Based on the Scriptural witness, the Report stands in the tradition of classical trinitarian theology that is reaffirmed by the confessions of the Reformed churches (132-133). It addresses the church today in which the doctrine of the Trinity is not so much denied as often given merely formal assent or perhaps neglected altogether. Far from offering either a novel or an exhaustive exposition, the Report intends to underscore the evangelical meaning and practical significance of trinitarian doctrine, to present it in a clear and compelling way that prompts the people of God to say joyfully, “This is the God in whom we believe and seek to serve with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength” (cf. 107-109).

3. The central theme that runs throughout the Report is this: The doctrine of the Trinity describes the inexhaustibly rich love of God shared among the persons of the Trinity in all eternity and communicated to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This central theme is repeated several times: We know the love of the triune God “truly, tangibly, and decisively only through God’s own self-gift in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit” (169-171). Again: “The overflowing love of God comes to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit” (192-193). Once again: “God is truly present as our Savior in Jesus Christ and truly present among us and in us as the life-giving Spirit” (216-217). And still again: our faith and confidence in the triune God is not based on mere speculation but “in the outpouring of God’s abundant love for us in Jesus Christ and in us by the power of the Holy Spirit” (274-275). And once more: “We meet God’s threefold love in the astonishing faithfulness of the Holy One of Israel, in the costly grace given to us in Jesus Christ our Savior, and in the new life in communion with God and others that has come to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit” (247-250).

4. Knowing and serving God as Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, whose love overflows makes a crucial difference in our understanding of the identity, power, and purpose of God; in our understanding of what happens in Christian worship, and in our understanding of the calling and mission of the church. Each of the three parts of the Report focuses on one of these topics. Part One, “Confessing God’s Overflowing Love,” describes not divinity-in-general or love-in-general but the particular identity and attributes of the triune God who is love. Hence the power of the triune God, as eternally shared and freely given power, is not rightly grasped as raw power, sheer almightiness. The power of the triune God is known in Christ by the Spirit as creative, life-

giving, transforming power, “the power strong enough to be vulnerable for another, to suffer with and for another, to give one’s all for another” (459-461). In like manner, the purpose of the triune God from the foundation of the earth, far from being inscrutable or capricious, has as its aim the communication of God’s life and love to us, the gathering of humanity and all of creation into the triune life in communion.

5. Part Two of the Report, “Participating in God’s Overflowing Love,” emphasizes that faith in the triune God finds expression in every aspect of Reformed worship. We are called to worship in the name of the triune God. We sing praises to the One who is thrice Holy and pray to the triune God who has created us, redeemed us through Christ, and given us new life and hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the proclamation of the Word of God, so central in Reformed worship, we meet God as the Speaker who addresses us, as the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, and as the Holy Spirit, the enlivening breath of God who enables us to hear the Word and take it to heart. In baptism we are made one with God’s people through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, being welcomed into God’s new community beyond the barriers of race, gender, status, and age. At the Lord’s table, we give thanks, recalling all that God has done for us, receiving the food of Christ’s very self; and celebrating our oneness with Christ and with friends, neighbors, and strangers, through the power of the Holy Spirit (958-961). At the conclusion of worship, we are dismissed with the blessing, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you,” and we are sent forth to bear witness to and to serve the triune God in the world.

6. Part Three, “Embodying God’s Overflowing Love,” concentrates on the practical embodiment of trinitarian faith in everyday life. Only as we live out our faith, embodying it in concrete actions, do we reflect and become part of God’s overflowing love in the world. In our practices of welcoming strangers, engaging in ministries of reconciliation and healing, offering forgiveness to each other, supporting the work of justice, entering into solidarity with the poor, celebrating our unity in Christ, and blessing others as God has blessed us, we bear witness to and--in always imperfect ways--participate in the mission of the triune God whose creative, reconciling, and redeeming love knows no bounds. Mission is a trinitarian activity. The mission of the church is rooted in the mission of the triune God whose love overflows through Christ and the Holy Spirit and reaches out to others. Just as Father and Son are one in the Spirit, so Christians are called to manifest their unity as the one people of the one triune God in their worship and service in the world. This third part of the Report, by the way, seeks “to open the scriptures the way that sermons do” (1467) and thereby hopes to offer, in practical terms, both challenge and encouragement to the church to be the people of the triune God.

7. As for appropriate ways of speaking of the triune God, the Report strongly and repeatedly affirms the traditional trinitarian designations of Father, Son, and Spirit. According to the Report, “The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rooted in Scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God” (331-332). On at least a dozen occasions, the Report employs the language of Father, Son, and Spirit, and it upholds the use of this language in baptismal practice in concert with the church catholic. Cut loose from this anchor, “the historical faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church risks being set adrift” (333-335). Thus in venturing other ways of speaking of the reality and activity of the triune God, “we must always be guided by the words of Scripture and creed that speak of God as

Father, Son, and Spirit” (356-357). Yet while privileged, these designations of the triune persons do not preclude other supplementary designations that seek to bring out some particular aspect of the infinite riches of the triune life and activity toward us. With the anchor of the language of Father, Son, and Spirit in place, “we are liberated to amplify and expand upon the ways of naming the triune God” (336-337). We are free to speak of “God, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God,” of “God the Speaker, God the Word Enfleshed, and God the enlivening Breath,” of “God the Lover, God the Beloved, and God the Love that binds Lover and Beloved,” of “God from whom, God through whom, and God in whom, are all things,” of “God the compassionate mother, God the beloved child, and God the life-giving womb.” Such namings or ways of imaging and speaking of the triune reality and activity of God do not replace the traditional designations. Nor are they chosen arbitrarily. They are mined from Scripture. When understood within the context of the gospel story, they expand and enrich the language of praise of and prayer to the triune God.

8. The Report is no doubt far from being a perfect or exhaustive statement of trinitarian doctrine. Good questions have been raised and more should be raised. For example, might not other passages of Scripture, such as John 14-17, in which the relationship of Father and Son is a central theme, have been explicitly and helpfully employed? The response to this question must be, “Most certainly, and many other biblical passages as well!” The doctrine of the Trinity does not stand or fall on any single biblical passage. Its biblical roots are deep and wide. Since the Report was prepared as a study document, it is hoped that it will stimulate discussion and exploration of not one but many additional passages of Scripture not cited in the Report. However, the question regarding the minimal use of John 14-17 has been posed in a somewhat more disturbing form: Were Johannine passages like this deliberately evaded or muted because of a desire to avoid or even subvert the designations of Father and Son? In view of the multiple instances of the use of these designations in the Report and its insistence that the traditional naming of God is irreplaceable “anchor,” “root,” and “foundation” of all faithful speaking of God, this suspected motivation lacks any basis in the text of the Report itself or in the intentions of its authors.

9. The section of the Report entitled “A Plenitude of Images” has aroused the most concern. Some readers have understandably been perplexed by several of the triads proposed as supplementary ways of imaging and speaking of the triune God. The triad “rainbow of promise, ark of salvation, dove of peace,” has prompted the question, Is God a rainbow? In candor, it must be said that the overly compact form in which this proposed image of the Trinity appears in the Report can in fact easily cause misunderstanding. One might, however, better understand the proposal as an exercise in trinitarian imagination of the kind frequently employed in patristic interpretations of Scripture. “Rainbow of promise, ark of salvation, dove of peace” is a suggested trinitarian reading of the story of the great flood (Gen.6-9). Read through the eyes of faith in the triune God, the story describes the identity of God as the Lord who promises and remains faithful to his promise (of which the rainbow is a reminder), who acts for the salvation of his people from destruction (provided by the ark), and who brings new life to creation (signified by the coming of the dove carrying evidence of a new beginning of life). It would be in line with the purpose of the Report if it stimulated fresh and imaginative readings of Scripture as witness to the triune God of the gospel not only in familiar texts often cited in expositions of trinitarian faith but in the surprising witness of less frequently cited texts as well.

10. Equally puzzling or offensive to some readers (though perhaps delightful to others) may be the triad “compassionate mother, beloved child, life-giving womb.” As a way of speaking of the triune God, however, this lovely set of references has support from some scriptural texts in which God is likened to a mother; from John Calvin who says that God has given himself to be known not only under the likeness of a father but also under the likeness of a mother; and from the Brief Statement of Faith of the PCUSA, that gives parallel descriptions of God as “like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.” As the Report notes, Calvin speaks of the people of God as “fruit of the womb,” which is surely a beautiful way of speaking of the Spirit of God by whom we must be born anew, as our Lord has instructed us.

11. Perhaps the most difficult and far-reaching question raised about the Report is whether it sufficiently distinguishes name (Father, Son, and Spirit) and metaphor (e.g. mother, child, womb) in our speaking of God. Is not “Father, Son, and Spirit” the proper and exclusive name of God, and are not all other designations at best only metaphors that cannot be appropriately used as names of God and at worst arbitrary efforts to name God in ways that please us or seem au courant rather than respecting God’s self-naming? Four brief responses may be given to this question. First, the Report does in fact speak of Father, Son, and Spirit as a naming of God that is to be highly honored and used with utmost confidence, not replaced, downplayed, or neglected. Second, biblical scholars and theologians differ on the question whether Father, Son, and Spirit is rightly understood as the “proper name” of God. Since the arguments are complex, the authors of the Report did not think it wise to rehearse and weigh them in a document whose primary purpose is a reclaiming of the evangelical and practical meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity in the confession, worship, and service of the church. Third, God’s self-revelation hides as well as reveals. The biblical naming of God is never thought of as providing us with the means by which God is captured in a word or concept. It is a deep conviction of the entire biblical tradition from Exodus 3:14 onward that God remains hidden and free even (especially!) in God’s self-revelation. The Report therefore resists the absolutization of any designations of God, whether classified as names or metaphors, not because we lack trustworthy knowledge of the triune God but because the reality of the triune God is always greater than we can fully comprehend or express. Fourth, both Scripture and Christian prayer and liturgy rooted in Scripture do in fact sometimes employ metaphors to name and address God or a person of the Trinity. This is evident, for example, in the familiar prayer, “O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” Here a metaphor clearly functions as a name and as a mode of address to God. To broaden and enrich our speaking of the triune God in prayer, liturgy, hymn, and preaching, the Report pleads for a disciplined use of images, analogies, and metaphors, understood as supplementary to the traditional triune designations, and guided always by the revelation of the triune God who has come to us enfleshed in Jesus Christ and who gives us new life by the gift of the Holy Spirit and Spirit’s gifts.

12. A word of caution in interpreting the phrase “love overflowing,” that appears prominently in the title and body of the Report. Careful reading of the text will show that it is not a general idea of love overflowing that defines the triune God but the triune God who defines love overflowing. In other words, the overflowing love of God is not an impersonal force in or behind the universe; the triune God of the gospel is the personal God who freely acts, freely gives, freely loves. The metaphor of love overflowing has its sole value in giving expression to the

superabundance and inexhaustibility of the love of the triune God. The love of the triune God both in relation to us and in God's own being is rich and plentiful beyond measure. The Trinity abides and acts "in mutual love and shared life" (444). God's being is in giving to another but is never depleted in the giving.

13. To repeat what was said at the beginning of this overview of the Report. The doctrine of the Trinity is good and joyful news. It sums up the witness of Scripture and of the gospel story in particular to the identity and purpose of God. Trinitarian doctrine can only be rightly understood when it is grasped as a description of the God of the gospel: the God who has come to us in costly, crucified love in Jesus Christ by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and wills to draw us into the loving communion that is the life of God in all eternity. God is truly revealed by the witness of Scripture; yet this self-revealed God is beyond our full comprehension. The Report aims to be faithful both to the revelation and to the mystery of God's overflowing love and self-gift to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is this revealed and mysterious triune God whose love overflows that we confess, worship, and serve, faithfully and imaginatively, in our Christian faith and life.

14. Any writing purporting to help the people of God understand more fully the mystery of the triune God does well to conclude with the prayer of Augustine found at the end of his massive tome on this doctrine: "O Lord, the one God, God the Trinity, whatsoever [we] have said in these books is of you, may those that are yours acknowledge; whatsoever of [ourselves] alone, do you and yours forgive."

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