

Josh Mangelson 00:22

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Carla Long 00:55

Hey, everyone, welcome back to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm Carla Long, the host of the Percolating on Faith series with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. And today, we are tackling the big, huge, ginormous topic of the Trinity. Hi, Tony. Hi, Charmaine. Are we ready for this?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:16

Hi, Carla.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:19

I think we're ready.

Carla Long 01:20

I mean, it's a big topic, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:23

Yes, it's...it's a huge topic. Okay, so I'm gonna say this: it's the Queen Mother of theological topics, meaning it's so incredibly important. And yet, all we're going to be able to do is kind of dip in today. So ... it's so important, I guess, because what we're talking about here is the nature of God. And connected to that, who is Jesus? And who is the Holy Spirit? And ultimately, who are we in relation to God? Who are we in relation to Christ, Spirit, and what is the church's role and how all these things are interconnected?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:02

So I just wanted to mention that for the listener: just before we started Tony and Carla, were saying, I'm nervous about this one, you know, because this is one of those that you want to do it right. And you want to make it clear, because there's been so much not clear, and so much confusion, or people have said that, if it's not easily understood, then it's not valuable. And so, so there's a lot at stake when we start talking about who is God and who is Jesus? Who is the Spirit?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:33

Yeah, and I hope that somehow we can clarify that the doctrine of the Trinity is not some kind of weird math. Sorry, Carla, the mathematician! I hope we can clarify at least that it's not some kind of weird math that doesn't make sense, but that it really has to do with what we mean when we say "God".

Carla Long 02:57

Well, I think that's a really great place to start, actually. What do we mean when we say the Trinity? And what are some good ways of describing the Trinity? What, I mean, what is it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:08

(I'm) really torn, because part of me wants to say: Why was there a need to start talking about the Trinity, but I think we'll get to that in a little bit. So I like your question. And I think probably that some ways to say it is there is only one God, but God is God's self in three ways. There is only one God, but God is God's self in three ways.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:31

Yeah, and I mean, other another way to say it is that God is eternally three co-equal persons. But then when we go there, we have to say that in this particular discourse, person doesn't mean exactly the same thing as it means, like, there's three persons sitting in this room right now: Carla, Charmaine, and Tony. It means something a little different in reference to God, but God is ... another classical way to say this is God is one substance in three persons or three persons in one substance. And it's very philosophical sounding. But I hope we'll get there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:06

And this is one that actually Tony wrote down earlier, which is very similar to what he just said, but I like it better. And that is God's being or essence is a three-foldness in a perfect communion of love. So God's being or essence is a three-foldness in a perfect communion of love, because that takes us beyond identifying the people or the parts of the Godhead to what is its purpose, the communion of love. And in many ways, that was the goal of those who created the term or those who tried to articulate the term early in Christian thought, is how do we explain what we've already experienced, this kind of interaction with God but also this understanding of this interaction within God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:01

And I think that what Charmaine just said is really important, because the Trinity, the doctrine of the Trinity comes out of Christian experience, right? It comes out of the experience of the first Christians in the New Testament. And then as the Christian community develops into the Roman Empire in the second and third century, they have to try and explicate what is our experience of God? How do we, how do we talk about that? So this idea of God's eternal being

is a three-foldness in a perfect community of love as one of the ways that they found to articulate actual, real spiritual experience.

Carla Long 05:38

So talking about the Trinity really came out of the very, very first Christians' experience, like, this is the second century you said?

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:47

Well, you've got to start in a good direction here. Yeah, the term Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible. But the term Trinity tries to make sense of all kinds of things that were part of the first Christians' experience. For example, whenever it was that the very first person said to Jesus of Nazareth "You are Lord", which very likely happened during his lifetime. But we know that the Easter experience was an experience in which people started using the term Lord for Jesus Christ immediately. Well, as soon as they experienced Jesus as Lord, remembering that they were Jews and monotheists, they started us on the road to the Trinity, because the term they used for Lord, in Greek *kurios*, was the term that the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures had been using in place of Yahweh for several centuries. So they were saying, they knew they were Jews, they knew they were monotheists, at the same time, they knew that they were experiencing the fullness of the God of Israel in this person, Jesus of Nazareth, who had eaten with them, had drunk with them, had wept with them, had suffered and died on the cross. And so they didn't think this out first, this was their experience coming out. This is Thomas in the Gospel of John: "My Lord and my God".

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:03

Which also helps us understand, in the bigger picture, why it is that eventually Christians are kicked out of the synagogues, though it's decades after Jesus' death before Jewish synagogues are just saying: No! You know, what you're saying is so different from our understanding of God, that Christ could be God. That's part of the reason Christians are now suddenly out on their own as an independent new religion by 80/85 of the first century. But they are saying Jesus is God. And the earliest writings in the New Testament from Paul indicate ... which would be right around 50 or 55, somewhere in there. So, Paul..., I means it's already very present in Paul's writing, that Jesus is God. And what happened in Jesus' life is a reflection of who God is and what God is doing in the world. So that's really important, I think, when we're addressing the Trinity, is that the reality for Christians, these followers of Christ, is that they're trying to express something that is brand new, and yet seems completely true and valid. And you'll see it in Paul's writings. Tony and I were talking about this earlier, because it's..., you can never stop, you know, this conversation could go on for a long, long, long time.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:28

Because what quicks in our house, one minute, we're talking about fixing the plumbing, and the next minute, we're talking about the Trinity, so...

Carla Long 08:33

Totally normal! Totally normal.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:37

But in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul says, there is one God, the Father from whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist. So already he's creating kind of the foundational understanding of who the father and son are in relation to each other and both fully God. And then later in 2 Corinthians?

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:02

2 Corinthians 3 where he says something like this, it's a lovely passage, and it's very, very unique. The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Now that's 2 Corinthians 3. So we have one God, one Lord Jesus Christ, one Holy Spirit, and there's no sense in Paul's letters that he thinks of himself as a polytheist. Now he's not... The church at this stage is not able yet to articulate how do these things work together, so that we remain truly monotheistic and not polytheistic. And yet we are differentiated from the monotheistic religion, Judaism. It's gonna take a couple centuries to work that out, but all of the pieces are there in the New Testament.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:47

And so, I mean, the easiest way when you're reading the New Testament or studying it or using it devotionally, in those places, or most of the places, where you see the word Lord (L-O-R-D) know that it's being used - if this is a Jewish author - it's being used in the same way that in the Old Testament, capital L-O-R-D is used, which is just one of the names for God. And so, I mean, that helps us to begin to see how prevalent this understanding already is, within the first generation in Christianity, that Jesus is God, and part of the One God, there's still one God and Jesus is expressive of that God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:31

And also in New Testament, there are examples of prayers to Jesus. Now, when we think of people of Jewish background praying, we think of them praying to God alone. And yet Paul, in the end of 1 Corinthians, uses this Aramaic expression, which means that it predates even his entry into the Christian community. He uses this phrase "Maranatha", which in Aramaic means: Come, Lord! It's a prayer to Jesus to come, right? So how do these people hold this all together, that Jesus is Lord. And when we say that, we don't mean that he's a "less than". But there's also God who is the infinite source of all things, the Father, but there's also the Holy

Spirit, whom Jesus breathes out on the disciples, whom the Father also sends through him at Pentecost, and who empowers them in a way that's only divinely possible, right? So these are the puzzle pieces that the New Testament leaves its readers, and the early church in the next three centuries has to try to work this out.

Carla Long 11:35

And when do they work that out? When does, I don't know, the word Trinity appear? When does that happen?

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:41

So the word Trinity is a Latin derivation word. It's often attributed to the North African theologian Tertullian, who lived in the late one hundreds, early two hundreds. But even before him, a Greek theologian named Theophilus had used the Greek term triadus, which we get triad from. He'd used the term triadus to refer to the Divine being. Tertullian, though, seemingly coined the term trinitas. So the Latin term trinitas literally means something like a threefold unity, like the Greek term triad. So it's analogous to the Greek term. And that's where it enters the Christian vocabulary, as early Christian thinkers are trying to say: look, we're not pagan polytheists, we believe in one God. And look, though we have Jewish roots, we're not Jews, per se, because we believe that in Jesus of Nazareth we have encountered the fullness of God, and in the Holy Spirit, God's fullness and powers and moves us. So they are trying on the one hand to differentiate themselves from their cultural environment, and on the other hand from the Judaism out of which they come. And then they're also trying to differentiate themselves from attempts within the Christian community to articulate this that aren't working so well. So for example, one attempt is sometimes called adoptionism, that there's one God, and that Jesus was a really wise cool guy, and that at his baptism, the God of the Old Testament adopted him and just use the term "son" as kind of a title for him. And the early Christian community said, no, that doesn't really express well the fullness of God we experience in Christ. And it kind of almost makes it seem accidental that God had to wait till a really cool guy showed up with lots of wisdom and so on to be called son. That's not what they meant. They also were trying to move away from any notion of God as God was like a shapeshifter, who one minute is the Father, and the next minute is the Son, the next minute is the Holy Spirit. They were trying to keep away from that, because that reminded them too much of Greco-Roman myths of the transfiguration or transformation of the gods. So basically, they coined the term Trinity as a way of articulating the very unique substance of the Christian experience of God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:05

So, where to go from there? I think in some ways that has been an ongoing discussion. And it was a few centuries in the honing, in discussion, before most of the Christian body was comfortable with that, and throughout the first three or four centuries, no, yeah, three or four

centuries, there's a lot of different Christian groups who are test-driving different and differing understandings of how these three elements or these three aspects of God relate to each other and how they can be best described. So, you know, you'll see in some of the church fathers, the writings of those early centuries, have arguments about this, but that's because there was a lot at stake. You know, is Jesus and the Spirit, or *are* Jesus in the Spirit, less than? Are they temporary, situational? Or are they eternal as well? Are they... do they partake in both the creative, the ongoing creative action of God, as well as the redeeming action of God? Or are they something else. And so there really is a lot at stake in all of this.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:28

I think, you know, another thing that was at stake was what they had actually experienced, right? So to have experienced God's amazing love and grace, in and through the proclamation of Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit, so that it was an indwelling reality, not just ideas outside of you, what's deserved their best thought. And part of the worship life of the early church dependent on this. I mean, if you are already in worship, praying to Christ, and calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer to come, then you have already said something implicitly about them having deity as their substance. So worship, experience, Christian identity, all these things were tied up in the articulation of this idea.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:25

You know, so the very, most basic what early Christians then are trying to say is that when you say "God," you are talking about the Father, Christ, and the Spirit. You're talking about all three, that the term God encompasses the three persons and their interaction together. So, I mean that if you want an image, the word God has within it these three expressions, these three entities that are each fully God, but fully dependent on each other, only fully God when all three are there, basically.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:06

This is might be a good place to say that the early Christian theologians also knew that they were dancing around a mystery here, right? I love the statement attributed to Augustine in the fourth and fifth century. He wrote a very classic book called "On the Trinity". But one of the things he said is that when we're talking about this stuff, when we're talking about the doctrine, the Trinity, basically it's not like we fully understand what we're saying. It's just that we're trying not simply to be silent. Because if we're silent, then what will fill up the silence is really unfortunate, unfortunate views of God. And so we speak so as not to say something that says not to say nothing, I think this is how Augustine said it, so that the early theologians were really aware that God's eternal essence is one of the words they would use is incomprehensible. We're not creating a postcard picture of God here for you, when we use these terms, Father, Son, Spirit, we know we're in the realm of metaphor. And we know that our language here is broken. But it's the best we've got, we have to be able to say something so as to articulate

what our faith is, and so as to differentiate ourselves from things that are not this. So, the Greek fathers in particular had this amazing sense of the infinite depth and beyondness of the divine being, and that the names Father, Son, and Spirit are what God has given us to kind of enter into this eternal mystery. But the mystery itself is inexhaustible. And so, by the way, they also understood that father was a metaphor, they did not imagine a male dude in the sky. That kind of thinking comes about more in the modern age when people especially from the 1700s on, when deism starts to influence the West, and also when people start thinking, when people kind of lose their imaginative abilities to not think in any other ways than empirical ways.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:08

Right, and then it becomes a very kind of literalistic understanding of father. And you know, we'll probably get to this eventually, but I think that is also one of the things we'll need to talk about as far as how presently in the church we do or don't talk about the Trinity. And some of our discomfort with the term father and ways in which there's other substitutions of that, that sometimes are helpful and sometimes aren't. Sometimes, not using the father term, kind of, we lose that aspect of God because we're uncomfortable with the term and how it's been misused in our time. So that, I mean, that's just a little thing that's helpful for us to understand is that there's good cause to be uncomfortable with the father part that just the use of that term because it hasn't been allowed to be metaphorical. And just following up on what Tony was saying, one of the beauties of the idea of the Trinity is that it is trying to not limit who God can be. It's like three open doors, these three aspects of God that are constantly inviting us in. And so for those of us who have... well, this happens developmentally, I think. For many of us, our first encounters with God may be by the Spirit, and that open door, where we sense God with our feelings, or where it touches our mind in some way, or our heart, is often one of the ways, and then kind of learning about Jesus as being a way of understanding that God knows our physical reality, and that God can empathize with us, and has lived that, and is willing to live it with us right now. So there's another open door that in our humaneness and our... you know, I especially think of junior-highers, the hormonal struggles and all the other struggles of becoming a person that happen in those years, that there is that sense that God is real enough, and understands these human struggles, and can be with us, and invites us then to know God's acceptance and love.

Carla Long 21:34

It would be interesting to know Jesus as a junior high student!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:38

Oh my goodness!

Carla Long

Wouldn't it? I bet he was great.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Especially yeah, I was thinking of you teaching junior highers!

Carla Long

What was Jesus like during math class?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Exactly! And then the idea of God as the source or creator, that we can maybe begin to comprehend with our minds because the Jewish tradition has given us this rich storyline of God's encountering people and that aspect of God. Always being self-expressive, first of all, but also inviting us in. And so, you know, within the Trinity then, there are at least three doors that are always open, that are trying to encounter us and invite us in.

Carla Long 22:26

So you're saying there's kind of like... it's okay to separate them out? But okay to view them together, or no, is that okay or not okay?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:33

Oh, I think to see each one as fully expressive, or demonstrative of who God is, that their essence is God, but we encounter different aspects of God, in different ways, in different times in our life, in different situations. Because sometimes people want to say, well, Trinity makes God... shuts down God, it closes God, you know, defines it God too much. And I think in reality it actually opens up this nature of God, to be in community with itself. But also, then, to be the very crucial element of who God is, is that God is self-revealing. And so that God is self-revealing in at least these three ways. But it gives room then for God to be more than we can understand, as well as these things we can understand and that Christians and even before that, within Judaism, have understood as God's self-revealing nature.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:37

So when you say "separate out," yeah, this is a place where you have to be somewhat careful. What the doctrine is trying to say is that God's own eternal being has eternal distinction within complete unity. So the persons of the Trinity are real differentiations within the divine being, but they're not three separated out things. Again, like Carla, Tony, and Charmaine. So, this differentiation in unity was expressed in the ancient church with the image, and I use the Latin word here, the *circumincension*, which means... which was a Latin translation of a Greek word. The Greek word was *perichoresis*. The Greek word was a term from dance. You imagine this eternal dance, the Divine Being as an eternal dance, Father, Son, and Spirit. And they also understood that while there was differentiation, they used the term interpenetration among the three, that is, the Father and Son are not absent from the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit are not

absent from the Father. And onward we go here. That all three were represented real differentiation, but a unity beyond any unity we can imagine. Now think about this for a second. What they were trying to get at is that God, in God's own eternal being, is a perfect community of love. And if you think about that, this is why so much is at stake in this doctrine. They weren't thinking of God as this male thing, this father way out there, and then you've got a Jewish guy named Jesus, who is a bridge, and a Spirit who is a sort of, I don't know, a sort of a free-floating power. No, they weren't thinking like that, they were thinking in terms of God's being as this open-ended dance into which the whole creation is invited, out of which the whole creation comes, but into which the whole creation is invited back. It's really quite beautiful, quite breathtaking. And one of the things... one of the places this makes a difference, I think, is that if the very ground of all that is, is communal, than community, and striving to build community and create community, is an expression, a necessary expression of who and what God is. When we talk about this, I mentioned earlier how this is connected to the doctrine of the church. Well, in the church, we... certainly in Community of Christ, we use the term community a lot, right? Community is related to communion is related to, you know, a coming together. When we try to build community, we are responding to the very revelation of God that has been given to us in Christ. We human beings were meant to live in community. And when we break community, or don't see community, we're going against the very grain of the universe there. I mean, I think it's quite a breathtaking image, really, when you think about it.

Carla Long

That is really beautiful.

Tony Chvala-Smith

It has ethical implications, doesn't it?

Carla Long 26:44

Absolutely. So I want to kind of go back to something that you said, I am going to reshape the conversation into... talk more about the restoration groups now. We talked earlier about how it's very dangerous to separate these three out. Except in our restoration history, Joseph Smith Jr. had some visions. And it could be problematic to look at those visions and think about Trinity in those ways. Is that right? I think I'm looking more at the 1842 version of his vision.

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:14

So yeah, the 1842 account, which is a standard account that lots of restoration groups rely on, has Joseph seeing two personages. And, well, one of the difficulties here is that first of all it's a vision. It's not a photograph. And the very use of the term personage, the... Joseph's use of the term personage, I think was meant to be imagistic, it was meant to give an image of what he experienced. But here's the real problem. That is the earliest account of the vision, which is... I'm not sure, Charmaine, is it 1831 or two?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:46

Maybe, yeah, somewhere in there, when it was written down...

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:49

When it was written... The earliest account of his inaugural vision. He sees one, and the one says "I am the Lord of Glory, I was crucified for the sins of the world." In other words, in the earliest written account, we have of that experience, it's not two personages, it's one. And the one is Christ, who refers to himself as the Lord of Glory, highly divine language, and refers to himself as being crucified for the sins of the world, that... in some ways it's a shame that that version of the vision did not become more well-known than the 1842 account. The 1842 account then became a further basis by which the Father and the Son, the Spirit were separated off from each other.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:33

And by which they became more male. I mean, it more focusses on the maleness. Yeah, which I see as a problem.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:41

Well I do too. Another thing too is that one of the difficulties we have here is that the 19th century primitivist and restoration traditions tended to cut themselves off from this much older Christian tradition of language that helps us talk about God as Trinity. That was part of their context, right? So, well, theology has a context. And so they wanted to make a clean break with the past. But the problem of making a clean break with the past, sometimes, is that you lose language and conceptuality that actually helps you say what you really want to say. Joseph Smith's earliest stuff is highly Trinitarian, Father, Son, and Spirit are one God. Read it in section 17. That's the Community of Christ version, section 17 in the... Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God. The preface to the Book of Mormon: Father... which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God. He started off with traditional Trinitarian language, but increasingly, he and the movement were cutting themselves off from this traditional language, and thus lost the ability to talk about God as one infinite God in three co-eternal persons. I think that was a loss.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:53

And you know, it really wasn't until probably the 1960s and 70s that as a denomination we recognized this big hole that we had as far as having good language to talk about God. I mean, it was already there, the Trinitarian language through our sacraments, especially those that have..., you know, being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, those three co-equal parts, being God. In communion prayer, the recognition of God, the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit, that they are all together, what we are committing ourselves to again, or being open to again, or seeking wholeness again. And so within the

sacraments was this language, the idea that, you know, in baptism and confirmation part these aspects of God all being at work. But in our preaching, and our articulating what we believe, we had been isolated, we had isolated ourselves, thinking that whatever came from 1830 on was really all we needed, but in the 60s and 70s, church leaders, especially as the church is being drawn into different parts of the world in new ways, and where we are having to articulate what it means to be Christian, we realize we didn't know how to talk about this very well. And so in the 60s and 70s, there was a much greater emphasis on reclaiming elements of the Christian tradition that would help us explain who we are, and why we do the things the way we do and why we understand who Jesus is and who the Spirit is, and who the Father is or who the source is. And so there's been much more emphasis on Trinitarian language and claiming Trinitarian belief as foundational to our understandings in Community of Christ (RLDS) in the last 40 or 50 years. And it's kind of funny, because I would hear people, I'm thinking my mom's generation, saying: why are we talking about Jesus so much? And, you know, we always used to just talk about God. And, you know, I would say, well, because, well, Jesus is God. And there's often a pause at that point, it's like, well, hmm, you know, because inadvertently, within the church, there became this idea that there is God, the Father, who's the real God, and then there's kind of Jesus as kind of a bit lesser, and the Spirit and Jesus kind of are down on that little lesser place. Or Jesus is the intermediary. Or Jesus' main job was to establish the church, even though lots of elements, really deeply rooted elements would point to the Trinity. There was this almost minimalist approach to who God is that went with this: well, there's God, and then there's Jesus down below.

Tony Chvala-Smith

Like first string, second string.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Yeah, I mean, you can't see my hands, you who are listening, but you know, God up there, and then down a couple levels is Jesus who kind of, you know, does the dirty work and you know, talks with people and stuff. But until I'd had this conversation with my mum and other people, I had not realized how, again, it's one of those dangers of not letting who Jesus is be fully God, then we limit how our understanding and interactions with Jesus can affect our spiritual life. If Jesus is just an intermediary, then our encounters with Jesus are not encounters with God.

Carla Long

They're secondary encounters.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

They are secondary. And so, and the same with the Spirit. And then we're not really fully mining those experiences, for what does it mean that God knows us, loves us and wants to

counter us because they're just functionaries of God, they're not really God. So I think something gets lost in that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:05

This might be a good time, then, to pick up the issue of language again here, Father, Son, Spirit, and we've used that language a lot. And I hope we've made it clear that while this language is really valuable and essential for certain parts of Christian theology, the term father and the term son are metaphors taken from human relations. They are analogies, and so often in Community of Christ's practice, you still hear..., I still hear when we're out in churches, there's a kind of an overloading of the traditional language of the first person of the Trinity. Father, this Father that, and so on.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:44

And that's kind of influenced too by popular culture, especially more evangelical or fundamentalist, you know, sometimes people pick that language up. And yeah, sorry.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:55

No, no, I think that's really important. And so in Community of Christ, we have an inclusive language policy for publications and so on that I think is really cool and helpful. And so we want to be able..., if God's being is, as the Greek and Latin theologians said is, you know, infinite and incomprehensible, then there's then the kind of imagery that we need... has to be inexhaustible, and the term father, in our kind of literalistic culture gets... overloads the being of God with male images, and sometimes not very positive, salutary, helpful images of God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:35

But one of the purposes of using Father and Son initially was to show the intimacy, that they are of the same family. There is this deep connection. So some of the biblical images of using Father and Son, Jesus praying to the Father, and talking about Jesus as the Son is pointing towards *that*, not to the maleness, not to the family hierarchy, but to *that*, that intimacy, that connectedness to each other, and in the more literalistic ways of attributing those names today, we end up with this very narrow image of who God is.

Carla Long 36:12

And sometimes damaging, very damaging of who God is, because some fathers are not kind.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:17

Exactly, or loving, or accepting, or present.

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:21

And some sons are not responsive.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:25

True, true. Yeah. And so within the 60s and 70s, with the feminist movement and more awareness, and recognition that for some women, maybe many women, the image of father was alienating, and reinforced the hierarchical and patriarchal powers of our culture to keep women in their place and to oppress and to marginalize women, there was an understandable and necessary backing off of some of that terminology. And there have been many efforts in the last few decades to try and come up with other language that, again, is metaphorical, but that tries to get at the nature of the relationship, rather than the stereotypes that can be imposed on the relationship. And so I'm assuming this is kind of where you were going, Tony. So if I've taken over, you can jump back in. But, so, some of the other ways of trying to understand the Trinity have been to use language like for the Father the word Source, and for Christ, the River, and the Spirit, the Flowing, so the Source, the River, and the Flowing...

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:44

...which we experience as a unity, right. And yet, there's a threefold differentiation.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:49

They... none can exist without the other, they are all expressions of the same action in the world. Another one is the Lover, the Beloved, and the Loving. And, again, all three are intricate to this relationship, to this thing that is happening in our midst. So language is helpful. All language, however, is limited. And so there are some things in even these other metaphors that lack... that there's a lack of as well. But I'm going to jump on over into analogies. Because the world is rife with analogies to try and explain the Trinity. And some work better than others, I think. And one of my favorite ones is... usually I find it helpful with children, but that means probably it's helpful to adults too.

Carla Long 38:47

Yeah, I love children's lessons, they are my favorite.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:51

And so I would just start with a, you know, a sheet of paper and draw a sun in the sky, you know, a round circle with little rays coming off of it, and simply ask the class: So how do you know that there is a sun? How do you know that there actually is a sun? How would you know that? I mean, if you couldn't actually see the sun? How could you actually still know that it was there? And so the answers would be...

Carla Long 39:20

...if I stand outside, I get incredibly sunburned. That's how I know.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:24

That's true. And that actually combines both the other elements. So usually one of the answers is, well, there's light. And so we know that there is a sun that is giving the light. And in this case, so the sun would be the Source or the Father, the light would be the presence with us, Christ. And then the other way that we know that there's a sun is: we feel it, we feel the warmth. And then that's the analogy for the Spirit. And so they are all one thing. They're all expressions of the same thing. But they're expressed in three different ways. So that's kind of a useful analogy and one that people can usually visualize, and is helpful.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:11

Yeah, I mean, we're totally in the realm of analogies and metaphors here. And we have to be, but metaphors and analogies sometimes are more real than we think they are, they really do convey certain experiences and realities to us.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Another one is the water.

Tony Chvala-Smith

You mentioned that one, the water the...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

The idea that the water...

Tony Chvala-Smith

Oh yeah, I know what you're talking about. Yeah, sorry, I was confusing it with the previous one. Water. Imagine the essence of water is H₂O. And imagine that it can coexist simultaneously as gas, as liquid, and a solid, right? So a little trickier, because we tend to think of those as temporary manifestations, but with the Trinity, the three persons are not temporary manifestations, they are...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:58

... but the potential for all three is always there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:01

Right? Right. So, I think something else I want to add to the conversation about analogy and patriarchy and so on is that in the classic doctrine of the Trinity, there is not a hierarchy. The Father in the classic model of Trinity is not, like, above. In other words, the three persons are co-equal, they co-relate, and there's not one that's better than the other. And so once again, in terms of Trinitarian theology, imagine the ethical and social implications of that. A community that is trying to practice nonhierarchical life together, is actually trying to practice the Trinity. I

think that's pretty cool. Lots of implications there for that. So in as what often happens with religious language, we tend to project our own social realities onto the terms. And so if one's culture is already patriarchal, which, unfortunately, many cultures are and have been, there's the tendency then to portray onto the term Father that which was not intended in the classical doctrine, that is that the Father is above, is the hierarch. And everything else is below. That is an unfortunate projection of cultural and personal realities onto something that wasn't intended to express it at all. So images have gotten..., there are feminists theologians who really are committed to the doctrine of the Trinity because of its nonhierarchical social and communal implications. And they recognize that sometimes the language Father, Son, and Spirit is really important and useful, but that it doesn't do full duty, that we have to have other ways of speaking about this threefold reality.

Carla Long 42:43

So we kind of got a little bit away from this, but I just want to be sure that I understand. So the Trinity and the idea of the Trinity has been in Community of Christ from the very beginning, right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Absolutely.

Carla Long

We've always believed in the Trinity.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Yup.

Carla Long

And it's... we have something in our basic belief statements about that, don't we?

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:03

We do, in the book *Sharing in Community of Christ*, if you read the, I mean, first of all, if you read the basic belief statement. Let's see, it says: "We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit." So there's God, Christ, Spirit, right at the start of that. "We affirm the Trinity - God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship." So then we go on to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:41

...and in the *We Proclaim Jesus Christ*, which is another statement that has been rolling around in the church for, I don't know, about 10 years, about a decade, where it's talking about who is Jesus and what is Jesus' nature and purpose. In the second element..., there's altogether nine. And in the second one it says, "Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, both fully human and fully divine. In him we see ourselves and we see God, whom he tenderly called Abba, the compassionate One, who gave birth to all creation and declared it to be 'very good.' Together with the Holy Spirit, they are one." So there too, trying to differentiate the roles and purposes, and yet recognizing that their value, their identity comes from there being those three persons together as one.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:35

And then if we even back up to 1970, in the original edition of what was called *Exploring the Faith*, this came out of work from the whole decade of the 1960s. This statement of faith has paragraphs, and at the end of paragraph three, we read a statement that is actually taken from Joseph Smith Jr.: "The Spirit bears record of the Father and of the Son, which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God." So now we're back into the 1960s. You will find various expressions of Trinitarian belief and thought. And from 1960 back to the start of the restoration, the problem was some of this stuff was taken for granted. And the real issue for the church in that 100 and 130 years was not the doctrine of God, but ecclesiology, you know, being the one true church and all of that. That might be the topic for another time. So the focus there on the church, and on salvation, tended to shunt the focus away from the Being of God. But the Trinitarian ideas were there all along, it just took new experiences in the 1960s to kind of compel us to say, oh, we need to really be more clear about that.

Carla Long 45:48

So you know, we've talked a ton about the Trinity. And I think that you've answered this question through our conversation, but I kind of want to give you one more chance to say in no uncertain terms, what you think about this question. So, the question is..

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

THE question...

Carla Long

Why is the Trinity important? Why do we need to know about it? What is it about the Trinity that we can learn from?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:14

I would go back to the experiential nature of God, encountering God, being encountered by God. And where it matters is that God is very intentional about finding ways that are

meaningful for us to know God's presence and God's love, and that God is real. And the three persons are all different ways in which God continues to encounter us within the long Judeo-Christian tradition, as the Father (we see that), and the Spirit is there as well within the Christian tradition, this additional way of understanding God in the reality of our humaneness, who understands and walks with, and the reality of the Spirit as God, prompting, touching, healing, speaking, directing, guiding, as that breathes, that breath, that is within our life, and to recognize all of those as valid expressions of God, inviting us into relationship. And when we lessen the importance of two aspects of God, then we are limiting God, and perhaps raising certain kinds of understanding of God, above others. And so if we only had, you know, an understanding of God with our mind, and didn't value the experience of the Spirit with our feelings, or emotions, or our inner spirituality, then there's a hierarchy of relationship with God. Some have this and some have this, but this is less than. So I think that is one thing that would be lost or a danger of not valuing all three aspects of God as God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:19

I think, you know, I fully loved that. And I think what I would add is that the Trinity doctrine, the Trinity is important, first of all, for me, because it makes sense of the different pieces you find in the New Testament, it makes the most sense of the most pieces. So that's, I'm using my head there. That's a head thing, but the pieces being Jesus as Lord, Jesus as the Incarnate Word, Jesus as Christ, Jesus as God, the Spirit as Lord, the Spirit as God active among us, I mean, how do you make sense of all these pieces without straying off into areas you really don't want to be into. The Doctrine of the Trinity helps me with that. So that's one other place that I would go and I have maybe a couple of others. But Charmaine, go ahead.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:04

This is just the beginning of an idea. So if it doesn't make complete sense, you know, hear or don't think it's you, it's me. And that is, if we only stick with one aspect of God as being the predominant or the only way we can understand God, then we end up in a dangerous situation of, you know, for those who rely on the Bible more, of going back to say, Joshua, or Judges and saying that God is a God that's happy to have people... you know, encourages genocide and willing to wipe out people and the thing is if we let our Christian understanding and classical Christian understanding of Trinity influenced us, then we have more than those particular images of God in a couple of books in the Old Testament to draw from about who God is. We have the self-sacrificing image of Jesus as God dying for the suffering of the world, dying in and with our suffering. We have the sense of the Spirit who is regenerative. And that's in the Old Testament as well. But we have this bigger picture of who God is, which holds us to a different level of responsibility for our world, and how we live in it, not judging it ourselves and condemning particular world faiths, or people, to eternal judgment or condemnation, but to... because the aspects of God or the Spirit, and Jesus, won't easily let us do that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:49

You know, in addition to that, I'd say, you know, in Christian spirituality, there's this principle that's been articulated for millennia now, that you become like what you worship. And so how we imagine God really matters a lot for the kind of people we become. So what if we imagine that God is an eternal community of perfect love, perfect relationality, perfect reciprocity? How might we become if we think of God in those terms? Now, I'm not talking about, you know, becoming the Trinity. I'm just simply talking about how our personalities can be shaped by the things that we worship. And I think I want my personality to be formed by an image of ultimate reality that is reciprocal, communal, perfect love in which there's constant openness to each other and gaining from each other. I think that's a beautiful image to live one's life by. And I guess another reason why the Trinity is important is that, for me, as Community of Christ, we have become over the last six decades a very ecumenical church, as we are engaged with other Christian churches, and we share with them the doctrine of God. In other words, our doctrine of God is not different from Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and that's really important to me, it's really important that we're on the same page with that, and that when we say 'God', we mean what is meant at mass or is meant in Eucharist or is meant, you know, at a Presbyterian worship service. We were talking about the same reality. By the way, that's one of the reasons that Community of Christ was given full membership in the National Council of Churches of Christ, because their leaders looked at our stuff and said, "Holy cow, you guys are as Trinitarian as the rest of us!" So that's, for me, very, very important. That's part of the world's healing, is sharing together in that kind of mutuality and reciprocity. So for me, there is..., I think for both of us, there's lots of reasons why the doctrine the Trinity is not just a head game, or just, you know, kind of weird math only the sophisticated get to understand, and I was thinking about the Trinity is best practiced. Actually, we can practice the Trinity in prayer, by including all three persons in our prayers. And I was thinking, you know, a very unique experience in Community of Christ is reunion or church camp. I started thinking about it. Well, actually, this is a way that our community practices the Trinity. So think about it, I love the word "the ground" of the phrase, "the ground of all being for God." Paul Tillich uses this. This eternal grounding. And we go to a campground and we're grounded in this place, right? And then we are there as flesh and blood people for each other, and we experience each other. So there's the grounding, there's the incarnate presence of each other. And then there's this Esprit, we experience, this fellowship we call it, that we experience among ourselves. So in essence, something as seemingly mundane as going to church camp is for us in Community of Christ an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity. The three persons in reciprocity are embodied in our being together in sometimes mosquito ridden places.

Carla Long 54:14

And in the KP, doing the dishes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Incarnation!

Carla Long

That's how we find it too. How interesting!

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:19

Yeah, so we actually..., the Trinity is actually closer to us than we think.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:22

And one other little piece, I think that is important to where we are right now in the church, is to recognize that in the Trinity, God's own life in perfect community, there is unity in diversity. And there is differentiation in unity. And so the idea that we don't all need to be alike, we don't even all need to believe alike, we don't even all... well I'm sure we don't, think alike about things like the Trinity. And yet as we try to live that out, and let it have space in us, our diversity, just as in the Trinity, the diversity is part of the unity, and makes the unity even more rich. And yet there's differentiation in this unity, in what these different aspects of God bring to creation, to the world, to us, as examples. So anyhow, that's a neat other piece.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:25

I like icons, Eastern and Western icons. And, of course, if you come into Charmaine' and my office, you see a lot of icons on the wall. And there's this great icon, it's from the 14th or 15th century, it's a Russian Orthodox icon, it's sometimes called the Rublev icon. And it's typically titled The Old Testament Trinity. The iconographer based the image on the story of the three mysterious visitors who come to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. And I think in the story, Sarah cooks for them all. I think that's what happens. Unfortunately, that's the patriarchal side of the story. But when you look at the icon, what you see is three equal, non-gender specific personages, sitting at the table, heads bowed. And the way the icon is created, it's like, there's room for you at the table. Isn't that beautiful? And so, contemplating the Trinity is a real gift and a real discipline. And it's about... you were invited to that table. I mean, what a profound image of God, that God, the 'Three God, the One' invites us to eat at the same table. Wow, that's really, really cool. I think that is very, very powerful. And that's one more reason why this doctrine matters so much.

Carla Long 56:49

Well, thank you, you two. That was..., I learned a lot! I always learned so much in these podcasts. People may think "oh, that Carla Long, that host, she probably already knows all this." Listeners, I don't. I learn just as much as you do during these conversations. And, Tony, there was nothing to be nervous about. I think you did great!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:07

There's so many places to go with this, that... and there's so many questions to that arise in this conversation that are important. And so, you know, this is a beginning, a beginning discussion, but there's lots of other places to go and lots of other writers out there who might be good guides in..., if you're interested in going a little bit deeper into a, you know, classical Christian understanding of the Trinity.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:36

Yeah, sure. I mean, I could think of a number of decent books. I mean, an old book that I think is still valuable as a starting place is Alan Richardson's book. Oh, my gracious, it's from the 1930s. It's called "Creeds in the Making." Now don't be scared off by the creed term there. It's really about the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity. And it's a very helpful historical..., and it gives you the basic historical background and the basic vocabulary. It's still useful after over 70 years. I don't think it's in print, but it's easy to find copies of. So that's "Creeds in the Making" by Alan Richardson. A more recent book, I love this book, it's by the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff. It's called "Holy Trinity, Perfect Community". And this one nicely has a glossary in the back. And he's a great liberation theologian working on the ground in impoverished communities in Brazil, who really sees the power of the image of divine community as he's working among the poor. So there's a couple of texts to start off with.

Carla Long 58:41

That's wonderful. And listeners, if you have questions, please post them on the Project Zion Podcast. Tony and Charmaine are superstar celebrities, but I think that they will have time to answer questions as well. So...

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:52

That's the most ridiculous thing you've ever said, Carla! You could not say a more ridiculous thing!

Carla Long 58:58

Well, thank you, Tony, thank you, Charmaine, for sharing with us. I really appreciate you tackling something that is a such a huge topic and is a little bit nerve wracking because you just never know what people are yearning to hear, and what people want to hear, and the questions that they actually have. So thank you for being here. Thank you for speaking with us. And well,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:20

And thank you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:21

Yes, thank you very much. Our pleasure!

Carla Long

...for just listening and learning. You're welcome. All right. Okay, we're out for the Project Zion Podcast. See you later.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Bye bye.

Josh Mangelson 59:31

The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter-day Seekers team or of Community of Christ. The music has been provided by Ben Howington. You can find his music at Mormonguitar.com.