Authorize the Office of Theology and Worship, with Participation of the Trinity Working Group, to Invite
Response and Comment to the Current Draft of the Theological Statement on the Doctrine of the Trinity,
and to Conduct a Series of Consultations Throughout the Church to Encourage Fresh Engagement with
the Fullness of the Doctrine of the Trinity—From the General Assembly Council (Minutes, 2004, Part I,
pp. 17, 617).

21. 2004 Referral: Item 08-09. Recommendation 3. That the Office of Theology and Worship, with
Participation of the Trinity Working Group, Prepare a Final Draft of the Theological Statement on the
Doctrine of the Trinity and Submit It to the 217th General Assembly (2006) for Action—From the

Recommendations

The General Assembly Council, upon recommendation of the Congregational Ministries Division,
recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006):

1. Receive “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” and commend it to the church for study.
2. instruct the Office of the general Assembly to publish the full text of “The Trinity: God’s
3. instruct the Office of Theology and Worship, and Congregational Ministries Publishing
   and Christian Education, to prepare study materials for “The Trinity: God’s Love
   Overflowing.”
4. instruct the Office of Theology and Worship to make “The Trinity: God’s Love
   Overflowing” available to the church, with study guide, in both print and electronic forms.
5. encourage the Office of Theology and Worship to work with Congregational Ministries
   Publishing and/or Presbyterian Publishing Corporation to make available liturgical
   resources based on “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.”
6. encourage the Office of Theology and Worship to work with Congregational Ministries
   Publishing and/or Presbyterian Publishing Corporation to make available the historical
   resources on prayer and worship that underlie “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.”

Rationale

These recommendations are in response to the following referrals:

Authorize the Office of Theology and Worship, with Participation of the Trinity Working Group, to Invite
Response and Comment to the Current Draft of the Theological Statement on the Doctrine of the Trinity,
and to Conduct a Series of Consultations Throughout the Church to Encourage Fresh Engagement with
the Fullness of the Doctrine of the Trinity—From the General Assembly Council (Minutes, 2004, Part I,
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21. 2004 Referral: Item 08-09. Recommendation 3. That the Office of Theology and Worship, with
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Doctrine of the Trinity and Submit It to the 217th General Assembly (2006) for Action—From the
THE TRINITY: GOD’S LOVE OVERFLOWING

Introduction

“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” is the product of more than five years of study, consultation, discussion, and prayer by a group of pastors, elders, and theologians. The 212th General Assembly (2000) instructed the Office of Theology and Worship to constitute a task force to study the doctrine of the Trinity in Presbyterian theology, worship, and life. The task force report was due in 2003, but work was delayed by the events of September 11, 2001. In 2004, the 216th General Assembly approved the request of the Office of Theology and Worship to seek responses from the church before preparing a final draft. This was done, and the response was heartening. Many faithful Presbyterians were eager to enter into deep theological reflection, discussion and feedback that has strengthened the final report.

“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” does not present an exhaustive or new doctrine of the Trinity. It aims to assist the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in reclaiming the doctrine of the Trinity in theology, worship, and life. Often the church takes up a theological issue only when there is great controversy—a time when a lack of consensus on an issue embroils the church in an intractable debate. The doctrine of the Trinity is a pressing issue for contemporary Presbyterians for precisely the opposite reason. Despite the remarkable renewal of Trinitarian theology in recent decades, this doctrine is widely neglected or poorly understood in many of our congregations. The task force is convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial to our faith, worship and service. The Office of Theology and Worship and the task force pray that Presbyterians will once again find that the doctrine of the Trinity is good and joyful news!

“God’s Love Overflowing” is a metaphor, deeply rooted in scripture and Christian tradition, that speaks of the infinite ways the triune God loves all of creation, including humankind. Comparing God’s love to a waterfall or a stream may seem impersonal, yet biblical images of living water and rolling streams abound. “God’s Love Overflowing” is an attempt to express the amazing riches that flow boundlessly from the triune God who in loving freedom seeks and saves us, reconciles and renews us, and draws us into loving relationships that reflect the eternal oneness of God.

The General Assembly document, “A Report to the Church on Issues of Language and Gender” (2000), provided important background for the work of the task force. The document speaks of “inclusive” language for the people of God and “faithful” language for God, language that plumbs the depths of scripture for rich and varied imagery. Such “faithful” language for God affirms classic trinitarian doctrine while seeking fresh ways to speak of the mystery of the triune God. All theological reflection involves words and language, and so we must grapple with the limits and possibilities of language for God, but this was not the primary charge to the task force. The General Assembly asked for faithful and constructive theological reflection that could help the church renew its faith in the triune God.

As members of the task force prayed, worshiped and worked together, they sought guidance first from scripture, then from our confessions, from the Reformed and ecumenical theological tradition, and from the prayers of the church, past and present. In its reflection, the task force was mindful of the struggle to find faithful ways to speak of the God who is love overflowing, to address the Trinity in worship and prayer, and to do so in words that faithfully bear witness to the mystery and the presence of the One who is with us and for us. “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” seeks to expand rather than limit the church’s vocabulary of praise and wonder. No one name, no single metaphor, no set of words or phrases—however thoughtful, poetic or profound can say everything that could be said about the mystery of God’s love made known to us - in Jesus Christ and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Part I, “Confessing God’s Overflowing Love,” is confessional; it summarizes our sense of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.’s theological convictions. Part II, “Participating in God’s Overflowing
“Love.” is liturgical; it seeks to show the ways all Christians participate in the life of God as we worship together. Part III, “Embodying God’s Overflowing Love,” is missional; it speaks of the concrete ways all Christians are called to embody the overflowing love of God in mission and service—in the life of faith, hope and love. The Trinity Task Force and the Office of Theology and Worship hope and pray that this report is found to be faithful to the triune God whom we seek to worship and serve with heart, soul, mind and strength.

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Members of the Trinity Working Group (2000-2005):

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I. CONFESSIONING GOD’S OVERFLOWING LOVE

Confident in the scriptural witness, in unison with the creeds of the ecumenical church, and guided by our Reformed confessions, we place our faith in the triune God alone.

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve (Brief Statement of Faith, BC, 10.1).

In sovereign love God created the heavens and the earth and called and formed the people of Israel to be a light to all the nations. In costly grace the Lord Jesus Christ ministered among us and was crucified and raised for us and for our salvation. In transforming power the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies us, draws us into new communion with God and each other, awakens our praise and worship, and equips us for the service of God in the world. The triune God does all this through “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14).

The Doctrine of the Trinity as the Summary of the Gospel

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.... and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:1-5).
The doctrine of the Trinity is a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ—it cannot be understood apart from this gospel, and the gospel cannot be fully understood apart from the doctrine of the Trinity.

According to the witness of scripture, God’s love comes to us in a threefold way: God loved the world and gave the Son for our salvation (Jn 3:16); Jesus Christ, God’s only Son our Lord, loved us and gave his life for us (Gal 2:20); the gift of God’s love in Christ has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22). The church’s confession and praise of the triune God is rooted in the threefold self-revelation of the one God who is our creator, our redeemer, and our sanctifier.

Even before the election of Israel and the coming of Christ, God’s creation of the world expressed overflowing love. The abundance and diversity of creatures display the majestic beauty of creation. Yet all creation groans for redemption, even as every human heart hungers for the fullness of life that only God can give (Rom 8:22-23). As sinful creatures, we know the triune God reliably neither by our observation of the world nor by our exploration of the marvels of our creaturely existence. Rather, we know the great love of the God who is three-in-one and one-in-three 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.

In continuity with God’s mighty acts among the people of Israel, but also with surprising newness, the Word of God was with us and for us uniquely in the person of Jesus who as an infant cried in the arms of Mary, who was baptized by John and received the Holy Spirit, who broke bread with sinners and tax collectors, who forgave and healed the paralytic in Capernaum, whose power flowed to the hemorrhaging woman, who taught with authority, who blessed the children, who prayed in agony at Gethsemane, who endured torture and death on the cross at Golgotha, who was raised bodily and in victory on Easter morning.

Active in the history of Israel and singularly at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God continues to be present and active in and among us as the Spirit, who filled the believers at Pentecost, who empowered the apostles to do signs and miracles, who called Philip to evangelize and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch, who gave a variety of gifts to the church and formed the body of Christ, who has inspired faith, love, and hope in the church across the ages, and who continues to call women and men to all ministries of the church.

The church’s confession of the triune God is embedded not only in the biblical witness but also in the early church’s prayer and practice. Christians are baptized (Mt 28:19) and blessed (2 Cor 13:14) in the name of the triune God. The apostle Paul describes common Christian prayer to God in trinitarian terms: “When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...” (Rom 8:15b-17a). The overflowing love of God comes to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world (Confession of 1967, BC, 9.07).

The love of the triune God made known to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is plentiful beyond measure (Rom 5:20). It is given freely and extravagantly, utterly unmerited and unexpected. It is always greater than we can imagine or conceive. Like a gushing fountain, God’s love overflows toward us. (Jer 2:13; Jn 4:14). It freely pours forth in an inexhaustible stream, never diminished in the giving, never drying up. It is constant and trustworthy. It is more powerful than all the forces of sin and evil that deny and resist the gift and call of the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ and shared with us by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be quenched, even by death itself (Song 8:6-7).
Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor
powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38-39).

The trinitarian understanding of God has been at the heart of the church’s message and prayer since its beginnings. Far from an ivory tower doctrine, it is a doctrine concerned with the truth of God and the reality of our salvation. Only God can save us and sanctify us. When we speak of the three distinct but inseparable persons of the Trinity, they are not to be understood, as modalism teaches, as mere masks or temporary roles that hide God’s deepest reality. Nor are Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit secondary deities or mere creatures of a supposedly solitary supreme God, as subordinationism teaches. The trinitarian faith of the church rejects both these views because they deny that God is truly present as our savior in Jesus Christ and truly present among and in us as the life-giving Spirit. Against the views of modalism and subordinationism the church declares in its doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are, together with God the Father, fully and eternally God. As the Nicene Creed affirms, Jesus Christ is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,” and the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped and glorified as “the Lord, the giver of life” (Nicene Creed, BC, 1.1-3).

A Mystery Revealed

The doctrine of the Trinity testifies to a mystery beyond human comprehension. It speaks of the very being of God that exceeds our understanding.

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”... This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations (Ex 3:14-15).

Our minds cannot fully comprehend and our words and images can never fully explain the mystery of God. But while the name of God is inexhaustible and exceeds our grasp, we are not left in ignorance. We are invited to participate in this mystery that has been opened to us by God’s own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit who binds us to Christ.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known (Jn 1:18).

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
not the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him--
These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor 2:9-10).

The mystery of the Trinity is an open and radiant mystery. It is the mystery of the truth that God is holy, abundant, overflowing love both in relationship to us and in all eternity. 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.

We dare to speak of God as eternally triune because this is the way the Holy One has come to us. The triune God is self-giving not only in relation to us, but also in the depths of the eternal divine life. In the unity of their mutual love the three persons of the Trinity are the divine reality from before the earth was formed and to all eternity. We know this to be true because God is faithful. God is not one way in relation to us and another way in God’s own eternal being. There is no God behind the One who has...
come to us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We therefore confidently affirm that the doctrine of the
Trinity is neither presumptuous speculation nor mathematical nonsense. About this the church must have
no doubt: the doctrine of the Trinity proclaims to us the very heart of God. Using the language of
Christian tradition, we proclaim that the Father so loved the world, sending the Son for us and our
salvation, which we receive in and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

When we confess with the creeds of the universal church that God is “one in substance, and yet distinct in
three persons” (The Scots Confession, BC, 3.01), we use terminology that is strange and perhaps off-
putting to many members of the church today. However, the intent of these words is to declare that the
mystery of the Trinity cannot be reduced either to a solitary individual or to a close-knit group of
individuals. Trinitarian faith witnesses to the divine reality as living, active, dynamic, and relational.
Relationship is at the heart of God’s being. One yet richly differentiated, God’s being is in communion.
God lives and acts in mutual, self-giving love.

It would be presumptuous to speculate about the inner life of God on the strength of our own reason or
imagination. Lurking in such speculation is the danger of making God after our own image or according
to our own wishes and desires. Yet if we keep to the witness of scripture, we can be confident that
confessing faith in the triune God is not fueled by idle speculation. It is shaped by the outpouring of
God’s abundant love for us in Jesus Christ and in us by the Holy Spirit. We trust that the way God acts in
relation to us corresponds to who God is in all eternity. Before the world was created, and after it shall
have come to its end, God is none other than the one who is for us once for all in Jesus Christ and with us
here and now by the Holy Spirit.

**Three in One, One in Three**

In the history of the church’s thinking and speaking about the Trinity, two analogies have been especially
prominent. One likens the Trinity to the capacities of an individual human mind. Just as a human being
is one and the same in each of the three distinct acts of remembering, knowing, and willing, so God exists
as one-in-three and three-in-one. Often called the psychological analogy, this way of thinking places the
emphasis on the one-in-threeness of God. The other analogy likens the Trinity to a loving communion of
persons. As human beings find their deepest identity in relationships of mutual love, so God exists as
three-in-one and one-in-three in the ineffable exchange of love among the three persons of the Trinity.
Often called the social analogy or analogy of human life in relationship, this way of thinking places the
emphasis on the three-in-oneness of God.

Neither of these analogies should be pressed too far. On the one hand, pressing the analogy of the
different capacities of a single human mind may reduce God to a solitary individual, neglecting the reality
of personal relationship within God’s being. On the other hand, pressing the social or relational analogy
runs the risk of portraying God as three separate individuals who decide to work in concert with each
other. This would be tantamount to tritheism or belief in three gods. Fortunately, we do not have to
choose between these analogies of single personhood and personal life in community. The church has
never declared one of these analogies right and the other wrong. Instead, it has rejected the dangers to
which each of these analogies may lead if pushed too far.

The mystery of the Trinity is reverently expressed by Gregory of Nazianzus: “No sooner do I conceive of
the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried
back to the one” (On Baptism, Oration 40.41).
Speaking of the Triune God

In recent years new ways of speaking of the Trinity in the prayer and theology of the church have been proposed. Some of these proposals are helpful; some are unsatisfactory. What must be clear is that we cannot distinguish the persons of the Trinity simply by assigning different attributes or acts to each of the persons. The divine attributes are held in common by all three persons: all are holy, all are loving, all are wise and powerful. Similarly, an action of God cannot be restricted to one of the three persons. All of the acts of the triune God are indivisible. The persons of the Trinity do not work independently. Each of God’s acts is always the one work of the whole Trinity.

For example, while the first person of the Trinity is often referred to as the “Creator,” this must not be understood to exclude the involvement of the second and the third persons in the work of creation. Thus while the triad “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier” appropriately describes distinct aspects of God’s relationship to the world, it does not designate the relationships of the triune persons to each other. In the life of the triune God the three persons are uniquely distinguished and uniquely united by their mutual relationships. Each person gives and receives love from the others in a distinctive way.

In what ways may we speak faithfully of the mystery of the Trinity today? With the witness of scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Reformed confessions and liturgies, we speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Presbyterian Church (USA) affirms and values this way of speaking of the triune God, resisting any tendency to discard or diminish it.

Faced with the alternatives of never speaking of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and only speaking of the Trinity as Father, Son and, Holy Spirit, we see a way that is more consistent with the scriptures and theological and liturgical tradition. 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. When secured, an anchor provides both necessary stability and adequate freedom of movement. If our lifeline to the anchor is frayed or severed, the historic faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church risks being set adrift. With this anchor in place, however, we are liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand upon the ways of speaking of the triune God familiar to most church members. We are freed to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity. We may cultivate a responsible trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faithfulness to the gospel frees us to honor and continue to use this faithful way of speaking of the triune God even as it frees us to adopt other faithful images. Rather than simply repeating the word “God” in prayer and liturgy, we are free to broaden our vocabulary for speaking of the triune God, emboldened by the rich reservoir of biblical and traditional terms, images, and metaphors.

The language of Father, Son, and Spirit has too often been misunderstood to sanction hierarchies that some human beings arbitrarily impose on others. However, a trinitarian understanding of God is indispensable in empowering faithful resistance to oppressive uses of human power that are rooted in hierarchy and subordination. Similarly, trinitarian language has been used to support the idea that God is male and that men are superior to women. For this and other distortions of trinitarian doctrine we repent. God is not male (The Westminster Confession, BC, 6.011). Question 51 in “Belonging to God: A First Catechism” asks: “When we pray to God as our Father, do we mean that God is male?” and answers: “No. Only creatures who have bodies can be male or female. But God is Spirit and has no body.” A trinitarian understanding of God makes it clear that the Creator of gender is not subject to it.

As we explore diverse possibilities for trinitarian images, we are mindful of the temptation to bring the mystery of God under our control. Therefore, we must always be guided by the words of scripture and
At the same time, we should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names, lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry. Such a view would insufficiently acknowledge the divine mystery, would neglect the freedom of God’s children to glorify God imaginatively with all our hearts and minds, and would diminish the joy of knowing God ever more fully.

Female imagery of the triune God has yet to be adequately explored. The overflowing love of God finds expression in the biblical depiction of God as compassionate mother (Isa 49:15; 66:13), beloved child (Mt 3:17), and life-giving womb (Isa 46:3). The divine wisdom (hochmah in Hebrew, sophia in Greek) is portrayed in the Bible as a woman who preaches in the streets, gives instruction, advocates justice, builds houses, and acts as a gracious hostess (Prov 1,8,9).

Responding to objections that the title “Father” is “more appropriate” to God, John Calvin reminds us “that no figures of speech can describe God’s extraordinary affection towards us; for it is infinite and various.” He further explains that God “has manifested himself to be both...Father and Mother” so that we might be more aware of God’s constant presence and willingness to assist us (Commentary on Isaiah 46:3). God “did not satisfy himself with proposing the example of a father,” writes Calvin, “but in order to express his very strong affection, he chose to liken himself to a mother, and calls [the people of Israel] not merely ‘children,’ but the fruit of the womb, towards which there is usually a warmer affection” (Commentary on Isaiah 49:15).

Maternal imagery reminds us that God is a mother who expends herself for us, sheltering us like an eagle hovering over her young and bearing us on her wings (Ex 19:4; Deut 32:11). Carried by and born of the Virgin Mary, the child of God shares life with us, working to establish justice, righteousness, and peace (Isa 9:7; Lk 1:46-55). As we are born of flesh and blood, so we are also born again by the Spirit of God (Jn 3:3-6). The Lord lifts us up and carries us throughout life (Isa 46:1-4).

A Plenitude of Images of the Trinity

Recognizing that all language about the triune God refers beyond itself by way of analogy, we draw on scripture and our confessions to speak of the triune God in historically faithful yet freshly imaginative ways. The analogies employed in the following list have not been chosen at random. They are guided by God’s self-revelation as attested in scripture. Some triads have a narrative quality; others are drawn from creation. Three guidelines have been followed: 1) in each case the three terms must have an inner relationship; 2) the terms must either be personal or functional—the two should not be mixed; and 3) functional Trinitarian language should be understood to amplify and enrich our understanding of God—it cannot replace personal language.

While classical trinitarian theology speaks of the “first, second, and third” persons of the Trinity, scripture also refers to the three in other patterns, as in the apostolic benediction which invokes “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:13).

As we worship, the triune God is the One From Whom, the One through Whom, and the One in Whom we offer our praise (Rom 11:36).

As we seek God’s grace and wholeness, acknowledging the sin and brokenness in us, our human communities, and the whole creation, the triune God is our Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace (From Gail Ramshaw, Koinonia: Services and Prayers)
As we read, proclaim, hear, and live out the message of scripture, the triune God is known to us as Speaker, Word, and Breath (Heb 1:1; Jn 1:1; Jn 20:22; Ps 104:30).

In baptism, the triune God is for us Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River (Book of Common Worship, p.412; Jn 4:10, 13-14; Jn 7:37).

As we are born anew by water and the Spirit, the triune God is Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb (Isa 49:15; Mt. 3:17; Isa 46:3).

As we grow in grace, the triune God is our Sun, Light, and Burning Ray (John of Damascus, First Apology).

As we offer ourselves, our resources, and our gratitude in stewardship and Eucharist, the triune God is Giver, Gift, and Giving (Jas 1:17; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 9:15; 1 Jn 3:24).

In celebrating the communion of our life together in Christ, the triune God is Lover, Beloved, and the Love and binds together Lover and Beloved (Augustine, The Trinity).

As members of the believing community, we acknowledge the triune God as our Rock, Cornerstone, and Temple (Ps 28:1; Eph 2:20-21).

When we speak of God’s wrath in the face of evil, the triune God is for us Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains (Deut 5:25; Mt 10:34-35; Ps 97:5).

As we seek to live in faith, love, and hope, the triune God is for us the One Who Was, the One Who Is, and the One Who Is To Come (Rev 4:8).

In these and other ways we stammer to confess that the triune God is an inexhaustible mystery of purifying and transforming love. God abides in eternal communion. Divine life is giving and receiving, sharing and delighting in reciprocal love. Abundant, overflowing love is the glory, majesty, and beauty of the triune God. By the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to participate in the eternal life of the triune God who is love (1 Jn 4:8).

We must always bear in mind that Scripture affirms Jesus Christ is the very image of God. This means the Triune God has chosen to reveal the Divine identity in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is the mystery of our salvation and the revelation of God to the world.

The Doctrine of the Trinity and Christian Practice

The church’s faith and life will be enriched as we learn and live into the triune reality of God. Faithfully articulated, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that Jesus Christ our Savior and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier are truly one with God who made the heavens and the earth and who called Israel to be a light to all nations. God is not a solitary and self-enclosed being (as we often imagine God to be and as we often aspire to be). The eternal triune God wills to communicate with creatures and to share the divine life and love with them. God’s being is in mutual love and shared life. God is the gift-giving God. This is the way God has related to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and it reveals who God is and how God acts in all eternity.

God is love. In the life of God and in God’s relation to us, there is no withholding of life and love, no
reservation, no qualification, no half-heartedness in giving. God’s triune life is described by ancient
church tradition as a *perichoresis*: a mutual indwelling, mutual interaction, and mutual interpenetration
of the persons of the Trinity in eternal life and communion. In this everlasting and interactive divine
communion, each lives with, in and for the others. All is held in common except the distinctiveness of
the persons in their reciprocal relationships of love. Confessing God as triune, we affirm that this eternal
life-in-communion of the triune God is freely and gladly extended to us and to the world.

This trinitarian way of thinking and speaking of God transforms our understanding of the power of God
and of fruitful human power. True power, the creative and life-giving power that originates with the
triune God, is not dominating and coercive power. It is not power that manipulates and overwhims.
True power is life-giving, life-enabling, life-empowering power. True power is the power strong enough
to live for and with another. It is the power strong enough to be vulnerable for another, to suffer with and
for another, to rejoice with and for another, to give one’s all for another. The power of the triune God is
the power of omnipotent, shared love.

The overflowing love of God given to us in Jesus Christ and shared with us by the Holy Spirit draws us
out of ourselves and into life in right relationship with God and others. Human beings are created in and
for relationship. We bear witness to the triune God by our life in relationship. Knowledge of the triune
God and knowledge of ourselves are inseparable (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.i.1). This does not mean that we
can use the doctrine of the Trinity as a kind of blueprint for human life or as a program for the renovation
of human society. But this much we can surely say: If God’s life is in communion, then human life, too,
created in the image of God, is intended by God to be life in communion. From this perspective, sin often
takes the form of rejecting life in relationship, of wanting to live only for oneself, of actively and
intentionally disobeying the laws of God, of wanting to live apart from God, or of living as though our
sisters and brothers did not exist or were there only for our benefit. But sin may also take the form of
self-devaluation and self-hatred, of wanting to disappear into another, of neglecting God's purpose
because we do not feel worthy of it, or of trying to hide one's personhood and unique talents. In whatever
form, living in bondage to sin is living against the grain of reality as constituted by the triune God, in
whom depth of communion and personal differentiation are inseparable. God wills all creation to
participate in this triune life of communion.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract theory but a practical doctrine. The truth of the doctrine of
the Trinity must be claimed with our whole heart, mind, and strength. It must be put into practice in our
everyday life. It has its roots in the proclamation of the gospel and in the church’s life of prayer. By
practicing our faith in worship and service, we take part in the life and love of the triune God. We enter
into the realm of God’s community-forming love, which is able to reconcile sinners and make enemies
into friends. As we worship and praise the God made known in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy
Spirit, as we attend to the preaching of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments of baptism
and Lord’s Supper, as we assist our neighbor, forgive our enemy, and live in friendship with all people,
we take part in the life-giving and peace-making love of the triune God. In Christian faith, hope, and
love, we are united with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our common worship,
common prayer, and common service of our neighbor, we are being formed and nurtured in the
overflowing love of the triune God.

**The Doctrine of the Trinity and Christian Mission**

Christian service and mission, too, are shaped and guided by the missions of the triune God. God has sent
Jesus Christ to accomplish our reconciliation with God and sends the Holy Spirit to bring us to new life in
Christ and to renew the whole creation.
The mission of the church is a participation in the mission of the triune God. The church’s mission is not determined by our own special interests and favorite agendas. In Jesus Christ “God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19; Confession of 1967, BC 9.07). The Holy Spirit is the Bond of Peace (Eph 4:3) who brings together in new unity people of many languages, nations, cultures, and races. The Spirit works toward the full realization of God’s reign of justice and peace. The mission of the church is established and directed by the reconciling and community-building activity of the triune God.

Participating in this mission, we extend the reconciling and peace-making love of God to others. We share the good news. We show compassion to the needy. We work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. We practice forgiveness. We welcome strangers and the outcast. We use our gifts to build up the church, which is Christ’s body. We encourage friendship and community among all people. We take part, always imperfectly and provisionally, in the overflowing, self-giving, community-forming love of God that is the mystery of the Trinity. The triune God who is and calls us to take part in life in communion is the object of our faith, the basis of our love, and the goal of our hope.

The church looks with eager longing to the consummation of life in the triune God who is overflowing love. With the Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we declare:

> In life and in death we belong to God.
> Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
> The love of God,
> And the communion of the Holy Spirit,
> We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
> whom alone we worship and serve.
> (Brief Statement of Faith, BC 10:1).

II. PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S OVERFLOWING LOVE

All of Christian life is a participation in the abundant love of the triune God. In our worship of God, we bring participation to awareness and speech. Each act of worship – praising, confessing, forgiving, proclaiming, professing, baptizing, thanksgiving, offering, sharing, praying, blessing, sending – nurtures our faith in this Trinity of love.

Our need and desire to worship confront us with the inadequacy of our language for God. With all the saints, “we are forced to raise our lowly words to subjects which cannot be described” (Hilary of Poitiers, The Trinity 2.2). We worship the triune God who transcends even our best efforts to sing or speak, to preach or praise. John Calvin declared, “If all that can be said or imagined about love were brought together into one, yet it would be surpassed by the greatness of the love of God. By no metaphor, therefore, can God’s incomparable goodness be described” (Commentary on Isaiah 46:3).

Yet our faith will not let us keep silent. In a favorite hymn we pray, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear redeemer’s praise” (Charles Wesley, PH #466). Our praying, praising, worshiping language is a reflection of the overflowing love of God’s triune beauty. We come to see the classic trinitarian language, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as a root out of which grows a rich vocabulary of praise. We draw from the deep well of scripture and from the prayers of the church, past and present, to expand and enrich the ways we speak of God and to God. Thus we hope to deepen our participation in the abundant love of God – the one in three, the three in one.

The sixteenth century Reformation was characterized by a “return to the sources,” especially scripture and the theology of the early church. Yet the reformation of the church did not mean the rejection of all that
had gone before. Calvin himself encouraged “an assiduous reading of the ancient writers” (Institutes, IV.xviii.9). Contemporary conversations with other Christian churches have helped Presbyterians to rediscover and reformulate our liturgical roots.

The Service for the Lord’s Day in the Book of Common Worship is ordered around four basic movements: “Gathering,” “The Word,” “Thanksgiving,” and “Sending.” These basic movements, described in the Directory for Worship, provide a helpful outline for our reflection on worship of the triune God.

**Gathering**

- Call to Worship
- Prayer
- Praise
- Confession and Pardon
- Peace

**The Word**

- Prayer for Illumination
- Scripture Readings and Psalm
- Proclamation
- Affirmation of Faith
- Baptism
- Prayers of the People

**Thanksgiving**

- Offering
- Eucharist

**Sending**

- Charge and Blessing
- Dismissal

GATHERING

Gather us in and hold us forever,
Gather us in and make us your own;
Gather us in, all peoples together,
Fire of love in our flesh and our bone (Marty Haugen, STF #2236).

Call to Worship

God brings all things into being by the Word.
God offers the Word of grace,
and people respond to that divine initiative
through the language of worship (Directory for Worship, W-1.2001).
The Spirit moves them to respond by naming and calling upon God,
by remembering and proclaiming God’s acts of self-revelation in word and deed,
and by committing their lives to God’s reign in the world
( )

We are called to worship by the triune God whose gracious love invites our grateful response. It is God who calls us to worship, not we ourselves, and so we are beckoned by words of scripture that voice the fullness of Promise, Salvation, and Peace.
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
The whole earth is full of God’s glory.  
I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God,  
Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.


Prayer and Praise

Joyful, joyful we adore Thee,  
God of Glory, Lord of Love...(Henry Van Dyke, PH #464).

Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor,  
glory and power to the triune God  
(Directory for Worship, W-1.001).

In prayer,  
through the Holy Spirit,  
people seek after and are found by the one true God  
who has been revealed through Jesus Christ  
(Directory for Worship, W-2.1001).

In worship we seek to embody our calling to glorify and enjoy God forever (The Shorter Catechism, BC 7.001, 7.111). Our worship begins with praise. “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” (Ps 150:6). We come to worship as creatures in the presence of the Creator, as beloved in the presence of the Lover, as humanity in the presence of the Holy One. We strain to give voice to the holiness, majesty, and mercy of God. And so the vocabulary of praise is expansive, rich, all-embracing.

In praising the triune God we use biblical language, both classic –  
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
and surprising –  
Mother, Child, and Womb.  
We may use words that speaks of the inner relations of the Godhead –  
Lover, Beloved, Love,  
and those that speak of the loving activity of the Three among us –  
Creator, Savior, Sanctifier,  
Rock, Redeemer, Friend,  
King of Glory, Prince of Peace, Spirit of Love.

Heartfelt praise of the triune God marks the beginning of all our worship:

God of all glory,  
on this first day you began creation,  
bringing light out of darkness.  
On this first day you began your new creation,  
raising Jesus Christ out of the darkness of death.  
On this Lord’s Day, grant that we,  
the people you create by water and the Spirit,  
may be joined with all your works  
in praising you for your great glory.  
Through Jesus Christ,  
in union with the Holy Spirit,  
we praise you now and forever. Amen (Book of Common Worship, p. 45).
Confession and Pardon

Lord, let your love, love with no end, come over us,
That we may be saved; that we may have light
To find our way in the darkest night,
Let your love come over us
(“Shine On Us,” Michael W. Smith and Deborah D. Smith).

The believing community announces the good news of God
whose love gives people grace to confess their sin and complicity in brokenness,
to repent, expressing sorrow and intention to change,
to accept God’s forgiveness and extend that forgiveness to another,
to forgive the other and accept the other’s forgiveness,
to work toward reconciliation in brokenness,
to trust the power of God to bring healing and peace
(Directory for Worship, W-6.3009).

As we offer our praise to the Holy One, we see more clearly our relationship to God, to ourselves, and to one another. In the presence of the Trinity, who is overflowing love, grace, and communion, we are confronted by our own loveless, ungracious, and self-absorbed ways. This overflowing triune love also has the power to overcome our sins of self-devaluation and our feelings of worthlessness. The God who forgives is at once powerful, wise, and tender:

Power of the eternal Father, help me!
Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding!
Tender clemency of the Holy Spirit,
enflame my heart and unite it to yourself! (Catherine of Siena, Prayer 5).

Through the ages, believers have used the threefold Kyrie (Lord, have mercy) in the act of confession, seeking mercy from the triune God. This ancient form is echoed in a contemporary prayer of confession:

Holy God, Maker of us all; have mercy on us.
Jesus Christ, Servant of the poor, have mercy on us.
Holy Spirit, Breath of life, have mercy on us
(Iona Abbey Worship Book, p. 23).

In Reformed worship, we approach the holy grace of God with boldness; an assurance of pardon accompanies an act of confession:

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.
I declare unto you, in the name of Jesus Christ,
You are forgiven.
May the God of mercy,
Who forgives you all your sins,
Strengthen you in all goodness,
And by the power of the Holy Spirit
A prayer of confession for Epiphany from the *Book of Common Worship* concludes with the light of the triune God reflected in the forgiven believer:

> God of glory... In your mercy, cleanse us of our sin, and baptize us once again with your Spirit, that, forgiven and renewed, we may show forth your glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 193).

Confession and Pardon are at once personal and corporate. As we have been forgiven in Christ, so we forgive one another, sharing in the peace of God who is Grace, Love, and Communion (2 Cor 13:13).

**THE WORD**

*Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word; I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord. Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, Still be my vision, O Ruler of all* (trans. Mary E. Byrne, *PH* #339).

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Scripture Readings and Psalm**

**Proclamation**

**Affirmation**

*The church confesses the scriptures to be the Word of God written, Witnessing to God’s self-revelation. Where that Word of God is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present By the inward witness of the Holy Spirit* (*Directory for Worship*, W-2.2001).

The assurance of forgiveness clears our senses for the hearing of God’s Word. A prayer for illumination prepares the gathered community to share in the reading and proclamation of the Word.

Meanwhile, let my mind meditate on it, let my tongue speak of it, let my heart love it, let my mouth preach it, let my soul hunger for it, my flesh thirst for it, and my whole being desire it, until I enter into the joy of my Lord, who is God one and triune, blessed forever. Amen (Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogian* 789-797).

The Holy Spirit is poured out on the gathered community, hearer and speaker alike. “... Through the Holy Spirit we know Christ, who is God and the Son of God, and in the Son we see the Father. The Word is the messenger who makes the divine nature perceptible to us, and the Spirit is the interpreter of the Word” (John of Damascus, *Third Apology* 18). As the scriptures are read, the people are invited to take part, and to listen attentively through prayerful responses:
With the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers we believe that “the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God” (The Second Helvetic Confession, BC 5.004) and so proclamation lies at the center of our worship. Preaching is a trinitarian event, enjoining the entire worshiping community. The Word written, the Word incarnate, and the Word proclaimed are spoken, heard, and taken to heart. The very Word that called all things into being calls us into service by the power of the Spirit.

What goes before prepares us for this proclamation; what follows is our response, an affirmation of our common faith. Just as our words, however strong and true, cannot do justice to the triune God, so no creed or confession can encompass the mystery of our triune faith. Yet we continue to preserve and reform and rediscover formulations of what we believe:

Lord, heavenly Father, you are my heart.
Lord Jesus Christ, you are my body.
Lord Holy Spirit, you are my breath.
Lord, Holy Trinity, you are my only refuge and my eternal rest! (Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light* 5.6).

In our preaching, in our hearing, in our understanding, the triune God is for us Speaker, Word, and Breath.

**Baptism**

*Living water, never ending,*
*quench the thirst and flood the soul.*
*Wellspring, source of life eternal,*
drench our dryness, make us whole. (*Sylvia Dunston, STF, #2247*)

In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the church in covenant to its Creator and Lord. Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome (*Directory for Worship, W-2.3003, 2.3005*).

Trinitarian language entered the worship and theology of the early church through the practice of baptism. Across time and space, Christians have followed Christ’s command to baptize new disciples “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). We regard this classical language of baptism not as a magic formula, but as a concrete link to our many brothers and sisters in Christ. We repeat the language of Matthew 28:19 in baptism to demonstrate our ecumenical commitment to join hands with all Christians and to show forth the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. With the exception of the baptismal formula itself, we are also free to supplement this language with additional trinitarian images to reflect the expansive grace, love, and communion of the one God.

In accordance with scripture, though we are many, in baptism we affirm one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (*Eph 4:4-6*). The community of the
baptized is bound together by the overflowing love of God which unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection, makes us alive to God, and sets us free to live according to the Spirit (Rom 6-8). The baptism of Jesus reveals the triune presence in the descent of the Spirit and the voice from heaven proclaiming, “This is my Son, the Beloved.”

Our baptismal prayer of thanksgiving expresses our joy in the fullness of the triune God’s overflowing love:

Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks,
in countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past,
and have blessed us with signs of your grace.

We praise you that through the waters of the sea,
you led your people Israel out of bondage,
into freedom in the land of your promise.

We praise you for sending Jesus your Son,
who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan,
and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit.
Through the baptism of his death and resurrection,
you set us free from the bondage of sin and death,
and give us cleansing and rebirth.

We praise you that in baptism
you give us your Holy Spirit,
who teaches us and leads us into all truth,
filling us with a variety of gifts,
that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations
and serve you as a royal priesthood.

Pour out your Spirit upon us
and upon this water,
that this font may be your womb of new birth.
May all who now pass through these waters
be delivered from death to life,
from bondage to freedom,
from sin to righteousness.
Bind them to the household of faith,
guard them from all evil.
Strengthen them to serve you with joy
until the day you make all things new.
To you be all praise, honor, and glory;
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
who, with you and the Holy Spirit,
lives and reigns forever (Book of Common Worship, pp. 411-412).

In the waters of baptism we can see that God is
Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River
(BCW, p. 412; Jn 4:10, 13-14; Jn 7:37).
When at baptism we remember the stories of salvation, we tell of the God whose faithfulness is known in
Rainbow, Ark, and Dove (Gen 8-9).
THANKSGIVING

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices!
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices! (Martin Rinkart, PH #555)

Offering

As the Holy Spirit has graced each member with particular gifts
for strengthening the body of Christ for mission,
so worship should provide opportunities to recognize these gifts
and to offer them to serve Christ in the church and in the world
(Directory for Worship, W-2.5002).

All that we are – in our creation as in our salvation – is a gift from the triune God. With gratitude and thanksgiving, we offer ourselves for service, we offer our prayers for the life of the world, and we offer our gifts for the mission and ministry of Christ.

When we offer our whole lives for God, we commonly speak words of scripture:

Now there are varieties of gifts,
but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services,
but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone (1 Cor 12:4-6).

These words remind us of the interplay of variety and oneness – in God’s relationships with the community of faith as well as within the church. The call to discipleship comes first in our baptism, and is renewed in the call to participate fully in the household of faith. In the koinonia of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God becomes concrete in our lives and we begin to partake of the divine life and to share in the abundant love of the triune God.

As we hear the divine call, we respond in prayer. In our intercessions, we call on the triune God in language that reflects our deepest longings, desires, and concerns.

Come, Holy Spirit, and bring from heaven a ray of Thy light!
Come, Thou father of the poor, Thou giver of gifts, Thou light of the world,
the blessed Comforter, the dear guest of the soul, and its sweetest refreshment;
Thou, our repose in labor, our coolness in heat, our comfort in affliction!
(Bernard of Clairvaux, Prayers, pp. 62-3).

We approach the triune God who has promised to intercede on our behalf (Rom 8:26-27).

Gracious God, because we are not strong enough to pray as we should, you provide Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit to intercede for us in power.

In this confidence we ask you
Prayers of intercession begin to move our hearts outward, toward others, overflowing into the world God loves.

O God of all creation who has come to us in Jesus,
lead us in your way of love and fill us with your Spirit.
Choose us to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
to bring sight to the blind and set free the oppressed.
So shall your new creation come and your will be done

(Iona Abbey Worship Book, pp. 84-85).

Thou hast accepted the gifts, offerings, and fruits brought unto Thee as an odor of a sweet spiritual smell, and hast been pleased to sanctify them, and make them perfect, O good One, by the grace of Thy Christ, and by the presence of Thy all-holy Spirit (The Divine Liturgy of St. James 38).

As we share our gifts of energy, of prayer, and of money, we are living our faith in the world.

the world the Holy One loves,
the world the Powerful Christ came to save,
the world in which the Comforting Spirit breathes and blows.

In this act of gift sharing, we recognize the Trinity as
Giver, Gift, and Giving;
Truth, Goodness, and Beauty;
Sun, Light, and Burning Ray.

Eucharist

Here, O our Lord, we see You face to face,
Here would we touch and handle things unseen... (Horatius Bonar, PH #520).

The New Testament describes the meal as a participation in Christ and with one another in the expectation of the Kingdom and as a foretaste of the messianic banquet.
In remembering, believers receive and trust the love of Christ present to them and to the world; they manifest the reality of the covenant of grace in reconciling and being reconciled;
and they proclaim the power of Christ’s reign for the renewal of the world in justice and in peace.
Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s presence, the church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in all

(Directory for Worship, W-2.4002, 2.4004, 2.4007).
Having gathered around the Word, and around the Water, we are prepared to gather around the Table. At the table we give thanks, recalling all that God has done for us, we partake of the divine presence, receiving the food of Christ’s very self, and we celebrate our oneness with friends and family, neighbors and strangers, through the power of the Spirit. At the table we meet the triune God who welcomes us as Table, Food, and Server (Catherine of Siena, Prayer 12); here we see that God for us is at once Grace, Love, and Communion.

Eucharist is the great thanksgiving.

Eternal God, holy and mighty,
it is truly right and our greatest joy
to give you thanks and praise,
and to worship you in every place where your glory abides.

You revealed your glory
as the glory also of your Son and of the Holy Spirit,
three Persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendor,
yet one Lord, one God,
to be worshiped and adored in your eternal glory.

We praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
great Trinity of power and love,
our God, forever and ever (Book of Common Worship, pp.126, 136).

The Lord’s Supper is also a grateful remembering of the drama of salvation. We recall Christ’s words at the Last Supper, and Jesus’ saving death is brought into the present moment for us as we share the loaf and the cup.

Jesus, the true Savior of the world, who died for us and is seated in glory
at the right hand of the Father, dwell in your hearts through His Holy
Spirit, that you be wholly alive in Him, through living faith and perfect
love (John Calvin, Form of Church Prayers 223).

Eucharistic Prayers – The Great Thanksgiving – give voice to the powerful grace of the triune God. The very structure of Eucharistic prayers is trinitarian, giving thanks for the work of the one God. Our Presbyterian Hymnal (p.13) describes the movement of this prayer. The opening of the prayer “gives thanks appropriate to the occasion, remembering God’s mighty acts of salvation.” This leads to the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy), in which the congregation joins in the praise of the Holy One. Thanksgiving continues, “recalling Christ’s work of redemption and gift of the Sacrament,” concluding with an acclamation that remembers Christ’s saving death and resurrection, once and for all. The third section of the prayer calls upon the power of the Spirit: “The action of the Holy Spirit is sought, and petitions are offered that we may know the unity we have in Christ and be empowered for service. The prayer concludes with praise to the triune God.”

Partaking in this meal changes us, for it is a partaking in the life of the triune God. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16, 17).

God the Creator, Thou hast made the bread.
Christ the Redeemer, Thou hast changed it.
Holy Spirit, the Binder, Thou does convey it:
bread for our touching, food for our souls:
Even as our lives are bound together in Thee....
God the Creator, Thou hast changed us.
Christ, the Redeemer, Thou hast changed us.
Holy Spirit, the Binder, Thou does keep us changed:
Even as now we are bound together in Thee
(George MacLeod, in A Book of Reformed Prayers, p. 124).

Holy Communion is a celebration here and now, a meal that nourishes our service in the world and that
whets our appetite for the heavenly banquet. Participation in Holy Communion creates in us a longing for
wholeness, for communion with all creation, for the promise of God’s Shalom.

**SENDING**

*May the God of hope go with you every day,*
*Filling all our lives with love and joy and peace.*
*May the God of justice speed us on our way,*
*Bringing light and hope to every land and race* (Alvin Schutmaat, *PH #432*).

**Charge and Blessing, Dismissal**

*Nourished by this hope, the church rises from the Table*
*and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission to the world,*
*to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace*
*until Christ’s Kingdom shall come at last.*
*God calls the church in worship to join the mission*
*of Jesus Christ in service to the world.*
*As it participates in that mission the church is called to worship God in Jesus Christ,*
*who reigns over the world*
*(Directory for Worship, W-2.4008, 7.1002).*

In Christian worship, the sending is the beginning – the way we live out what we practice in worship
(Rom 12:1). We have been forgiven, we have taken the Word to heart, we have been renewed and
refreshed, we have offered what we have and are to the one God who is Giver, Gift, and Giving. The
overflowing love of the triune God fills us with spiritual power, compassionate mercy, and creative
imagination, preparing us to live in this overflowing love.

Arise, O Spirit of Life,
that through Thee we may begin to live;
descend upon us and transform us
into such human beings as the heart of God longs to see,
renewed into the image of Christ,
and going on from glory to glory.
O God, Thou Supreme Good, make Thyself known to us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen (Gerhard Tersteegen, in A Book of Reformed Prayers, p. 60).

Just as we gather around the Word and the Font and the Table, so we are sent out to proclaim the good
news, to welcome the stranger, and to feed the hungry. The worshipping community is sent forth with a
charge.
As you have been fed at this table—go to feed the hungry.
As you have been set free—go to set free the imprisoned.
As you have received—give.
As you have heard—proclaim.
And the blessing which you have received
from Father, Son and Spirit go with you
(alt. Iona Abbey Worship Book, p. 189).

As we go from worship into the world, words of blessing and benediction are spoken,

The blessing of God and the Lord be yours,
The blessing of the perfect Spirit be yours,
The blessing of the Three be pouring for you
Mildly and generously,
Mildly and generously (Celtic Vision, p. 248).

The grace of Christ attend you,
the love of God surround you,
the Holy Spirit keep you,
that you may live in faith,
abound in hope,
and grow in love,
both now and forevermore.
Amen (Book of Common Worship, p. 851).

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.
Amen!

III. EMBODYING GOD’S OVERFLOWING LOVE

The life of faith is our embodiment of God’s overflowing love in the world. Because God is love, the
love of God and neighbor becomes the pattern for our life as creatures made in the divine image. “If we
love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us” (1 Jn 4:7-12). The Law of Moses
insists on the inextricable connection between God’s love toward us and our love of others. This whole-
hearted love is made clear in the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
You shall love the LORD your God
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your might.
Keep these words that I am commanding you today
in your heart (Deut 6:4-6).

At the center of both law and gospel is the commandment to embody God’s overflowing love in
all our relationships. Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, “By this will everyone
know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” He even taught his followers to love their enemies (Matt 5:44). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus recalled the Shema.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

This is the greatest and first commandment.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt 22:36-40).

The abundant overflowing love of Giver, Gift, and Giving draws us out of ourselves and into life and love-affirming acts of giving and receiving. As we delight in the glory, majesty, and beauty of holiness, we are drawn into the communion of restored relationship. In gratitude for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to live in love, and emboldened to bear witness and to serve. The pattern of our worship shapes the pattern of our lives together. The Spirit’s presence in the life of the church creates a community which bears witness to God’s welcoming, reconciling, sanctifying, just, sharing, celebrating and blessed love.

Welcoming Love
Reconciling Love
Sanctifying Love
Loving Justly
Sharing Love
Celebrating Love
Love’s Blessing

The following reflections on the embodiment of God's triune love seek to open the scriptures in the way that sermons do. Through a variety of human voices, the Spirit challenges us to embody God's overflowing love.

Welcoming Love

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom 15:7).

When God introduced Eve to Adam, Adam welcomed her with open arms. “You are, indeed, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” he said (Gen 2:23). Recognizing his fundamental connection to her, his shared humanity with her, he could not help but celebrate her presence, imagining the possibilities for what life would look like together.

We continue to grieve over what happens next. For somehow, in the course of a few verses, Adam moves from exulting in his fellowship with Eve to blaming her for his own violation of God’s law. From “bone of bone and flesh of flesh” to “she made me do it! She gave me the fruit! It’s her fault” (see Gen 3:12). The once-beloved Eve, she who shares in the very substance of Adam, is no longer welcome. Fellowship is broken. Lines are now drawn.
What would the world be like if we could get back to the welcoming words of Adam, the fundamental recognition that we share in the same stuff of creaturely existence? What would it mean for us to know that our lives in some sense indwell those of one another as those made in the image of the triune God, that One who is perfectly united even in differentiation?

Of course our conviction and our hope is that the church is a place where we seek to welcome one another with the enthusiasm of Adam meeting Eve. One church gives every visitor homemade brownie mix, wrapped up in a cutely-decorated Mason jar. And That’s not a bad start, even if it’s still a far cry from looking the visitor in the eye and knowing that it is we, only together, who reflect the image of God. The truth is that getting beyond a superficial offering of niceties to the genuine connection of deep welcoming is difficult for us--even impossible for us--because we are divided. We are divided by our denial of sin, by our blaming others for the predicament we find ourselves in. We size people up and evaluate them and stereotype them, keeping them at arms’ length rather than truly receiving them.

So how do we get back to that joy-full cry of Adam? Our forbears in the faith--as far back as Irenaeus (d. ca. 202)--were fond of putting Adam’s words in the mouth of Jesus Christ himself. The one who entered into the womb of Mary, who loved to share a meal with friends and with strangers, who cried out in agony on the cross; this one looks us directly in the eye and says, “you are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” We are welcomed as God’s beloved because God has entered into fundamental connection with us in the person of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Given that God is simultaneously different from us, how all this works is a mystery. But it is a mystery which is revealed to us, known by us, and to which we are called to bear witness. Convinced of the reality of God’s welcoming love, the Apostle Paul extended welcome to Jews and Gentiles, eager for all to know “the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph 3:10). He insisted that through Christ, in one Spirit, all have access to the Father. We are, therefore, “no longer strangers and aliens... but members of the household of God” (Eph 2:18-19). The rift has been healed; we are free to welcome one another with open arms.

One pastor does an exceptional job of conveying that the welcoming work of the church is rooted and grounded in the overflowing love of the welcoming, triune God (Eph 3:17). Every church, of course, wants to be welcoming. But in this church the welcome seems to be oriented in a place where it cannot be robbed by the fragility of our pettiness, our blaming, our sin. The service begins with a processional, a loaf of crusty bread and a beautiful chalice brought down the center aisle, followed by a pitcher of water large enough to need two hands to carry it. The processional ends; the music stops. The pastor goes to the table, her face full of the joy that comes when we have the opportunity to share that great mystery which is the heart of our faith. She breaks the bread, and lifts the chalice. She pours the pitcher of water into the font until it splashes over the sides. Lifting her hands, she looks out at those gathered and greets them with the words, “Welcome home.”

Reconciling Love

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion... (Lk 15:20).

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18).

In Jesus’ parable of the prodigal, a restless son cuts his ties with his family, leaves home, and squanders his portion of the family treasure. When he loses everything, he decides to return home to ask for his
father’s forgiveness. But before the prodigal has a chance to make his plea, his father runs out to embrace him, orders that he be dressed in royal garb, and arranges a feast to celebrate his return. This familiar parable of Jesus describes the unexpected, overflowing, extravagant love of God who works for our reconciliation long in advance of our journey home.

There is, however, a second part of the story that is sometimes overlooked. The elder brother of the prodigal is angry and resentful. He resists being reconciled to his undeserving brother. He refuses to rejoice in the father’s gracious act of reconciliation.

As the second part of the parable suggests, the reconciling love of God arouses resistance. It challenges our sense of moral superiority. It upsets attitudes and practices like racial prejudices and class divisions that keep us at war with God and each other. Like the elder brother we often prefer to justify our separation from others, to nurse our wounds, and to harbor our resentments. We resist the truth that right relationship with God is inseparable from reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

In addition to arousing resistance, the reconciling love of God is costly. Just as the father of Jesus’ parable spares no expense in bringing about reconciliation with his lost son, so for the reconciliation of the world God in Jesus Christ became obedient unto death. By his own blood Christ has created one new humanity, breaking down all dividing walls, and giving us all “access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18). If we are to participate in the reconciling love of God, there will be a cost. We will have to empty ourselves of the self-righteousness, the abuse of power, and the deadly desire to control others that build walls between us and God and between us and other people. We will have to allow ourselves to be united with our servant Lord by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

The parable also teaches that the reconciling love of God is inclusive. It embraces the despised as well as the respected. It includes every aspect of human life: the personal and the communal, the economic and the political, our relationships with friends and our relationships with enemies.

According to the parable of the prodigal and indeed according to the entire biblical witness, the reconciling love of God is both a surprising gift and a high calling. We are all called to the ministry of reconciliation by the reconciling love of God. To be reconciled to the triune God is to be forgiven, made new, given reason to rejoice, and sent into the world as ambassadors of the love of God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In a world addicted to violence, the biblical message of the reconciling love of God calls us to be agents of reconciliation in our family, in our church, in our community, and in international relationships. We are called to be peacemakers and to work at settling disputes without recourse to violence. “The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies, and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace” (BC 9.45).

The reconciling love of the triune God calls and enables us to embrace those we often exclude because we consider them “other,” “different,” “unworthy,” “the enemy.” When under the prompting of the Holy Spirit we dare to take part in the ministry of reconciliation in response to God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ for us and for the world, we bear witness to and participate in the very being and activity of the triune God.

Sanctifying Love

… that we may present everyone complete in Christ.
For this I toil and struggle with all the energy
that he powerfully inspires within me (Col 1:28-29).

The gospels are full of healing stories, accounts of Jesus healing the sick, the lame, the blind, the bent, the broken. Luke tells the story of ten lepers who cry to Jesus for mercy; all ten are healed and cleansed (Lk 17), but only one returns thanks. In the gospels, bodily healing is most often accompanied by some kind of spiritual healing, by forgiveness, newfound faith, the praise of God, the telling of good news. “Your faith has made you well,” Jesus says to one leper, the only one of ten who turned around and said “thank you” to Jesus for making him clean and whole. This man was not only unclean, a leper, an outcast, but a foreigner, a Samaritan. He obeyed Jesus and was cleansed and he came back shouting praise to God. His healing was complete; he was cleansed from the inside out. Spiritual wholeness and physical well-being are connected. Salvation, sanctity, health and healing are integral to Jesus’ ministry. Holiness and wholeness, wellness and well-being go together.

We all have holiness codes. Some people are clean; others are not. To some, holiness has to do with legalism, with outward adherence to rules and regulations. But Jesus said, “it’s not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean, but what comes out” (Matt 15:11, para.). What we say and what we do come from the inside out. Here the words of Jesus and the spirit of the Law are in concert. God looks on the heart. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. By faith we are made whole slowly but surely; by loving God wholeheartedly—body, mind, soul, and strength—we learn to love as God loves, fully and freely.

Sanctity moves from the inside out. Sanctification is a lifelong process of growth in grace. We are healed, restored, freed, transformed into God’s likeness by degrees.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3.17-18).

God’s holy love rubs off on us and that holiness, our wholeness, rubs off on others—on neighbors and strangers, on the weak and the strong—through whole-hearted love, love that seeks the welfare and well-being of friend and foe, of creatures and of creation itself. It is a holy mystery: we are bearers of divine love and holiness. Our relationship with the holy Trinity enables us to see the world with new insight; suddenly the ordinary becomes sacred; people, time, places are hallowed.

Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.” He knew that if God’s love dwells in us we will become more loving; if God’s holiness cleanses us, we will become more and more whole; if God’s grace fills us grace will grow in us. We will be changed by the gracious love of the triune God making our lives as creatures in the world more holy. We begin to see ourselves and others as saints. Holiness happens from the inside out.

Loving Justly

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:8).
And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now own do not sin again” (John 8:11b).

To do justice…that’s a tough call. *A Brief Statement of Faith* affirms the justice mandate: “In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage . . . to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” (*BC* 66, 71). Yet age-old conditions are witness to the failure to live and love justly. Justice butts up against power, privilege, and prejudice. The ancient cries for justice are manifold. Habakkuk laments the reality that “…justice never prevails” (Hab 1:4b). Malevolence compels Esther to speak. Amos voices God’s indignation: “I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs. But let justice roll down like water…” (Am 5:21, 23-24).

Put simply, “God don’t like ugly!” This African American colloquialism reflects divine displeasure with the ways of the world: “[The Lord] expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” (Isa 5: 7b). Today every part of the world is teeming with systems and attitudes that oppress, destroy and serve as insidious weapons of mass destruction. Hymnist Brian Wren strikes a chord for loving action:

> With faith newborn and passionate for justice,  
> together now, we’ll travel out from home,  
> to sacrifice the peace of calm uprightness,  
> and struggle for the city of Shalom  
> *(Brian Wren, Piece Together Praise).*

“Sacrifice” and “struggle”—words that signal hard work, discomfort, and often reflect a voice in the wilderness, radical and standing alone. Jesus rejects laws that cause suffering, laws with loopholes, laws that steal personhood, laws that kill the spirit. When tested, he offers a radical standard of justice. The woman accused of adultery is such a test. The law is clear; adulterers are stoned. The accusers are on firm legal ground. But, while legally correct, are they morally correct? Does their law reflect God’s justice?

No! We are called to a higher standard.

> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;” and any other divine commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (*Rom 13:8-10*).

Love overflowing is the essence of the Three in One; right relationship, complete and perfect within the Trinity draws us to ponder all our relationships and our participation in creating a just society. Through the lens of love, the woman’s accusers fail the test, “Is this God’s justice?”

In the movie, *A Few Good Men*, two marines obey orders to punish Willie, a comrade, but perceived as a weakling, a snitch, and an embarrassment to the squad. Their actions result in Willie’s accidental death and they are dishonorably discharged. Crushed by the verdict, one marine cries, “We followed an order. What did we do wrong? We didn’t do anything wrong!” The other responds, “Yeah, we did. We were supposed to fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. We were supposed to fight for Willie.”

God’s justice is full of compassion and reflects a fierce bias toward the weak. God calls us to fight for the Willies of the world—women, children and men, vulnerable and invisible. They rummage through trashcans; they stand in line for jobs and food; they are below the poverty line; they are across the border; they are in prison; they are in debt. They are our neighbors, but through indifference we do not to see
them. Indifference may become cruelty when justice is meted out to strangers or enemies. Is cruelty ever permissible as a means to an end? Is this God’s justice?

Loving justly affirms Jesus’ blessing and sending to go and sin no more. Loving justly is more than mere lip service to an ideal. It means that love, even in radical forms, is the only order that we obey. It requires sacrifice and struggle for Shalom.

This is the justice of the triune God—the prospect of that peaceful kingdom where the wolf and lamb feed together, the cow and the bear graze, and where none will hurt or destroy on God’s holy mountain (Isa 65:25). God gives us the mandate; Jesus gives us the example; the Spirit gives us courage. . .to do justice—a tough, but high calling.

Sharing Love

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance,
so that by always having enough of everything,
you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Cor 9:8).

What might a community that faithfully reflects God’s intentions for human relationships look like? The apostle Paul suggests that it would look like a human body, constituted by its various parts and indistinguishable from them (I Cor 12, Rom 12, Eph. 4). Christ is the head of this body, in which Christians are literally members of one another (Rom 12:5). This unprecedented interconnectedness came to be called koinonia in the New Testament, and took on very tangible characteristics (Acts 2:42-47).

The early Christians shared everything with one another: love, time, property, possessions, energy, wisdom, compassion, assistance. In this reciprocal sharing, the body and its members received power to display the triune God’s overflowing love to the world, in fulfillment of the risen Christ’s commission to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Koinonia is sharing, participation, partaking, communion. As the early Christians reflected more deeply on the nature of God’s triune life in the light of Jesus’ incarnation, life, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return, they came to see that the unparalleled depths of communion that they experienced every day in their shared life with one another were actually the overflow of God’s own love. This overflowing love existed eternally in God as the mutual participation, self-giving, vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility shared among the divine persons. As the divine koinonia, it was the source of all human koinonia. Jesus prayed that this might be so: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:20-21). By the Holy Spirit, this mutually self-giving divine life graciously overflowed in a sharing of God’s limitless generosity and abundance with us in Jesus Christ.

In our life together in the church, the body of Christ, the implications are staggering. Partaking of the very life of God, we participate unreservedly in one another’s lives. Freely sharing God’s abundant blessings with others, we reflect God’s infinite self-giving in attitudes and acts of human generosity.

We partake regularly together of God’s extravagant grace in worship, sharing in the very body and blood of Christ, and miraculously being interconnected with one another as we receive the bread and the cup (1 Cor 10:16-17).
We give generously and sacrificially of the abundant resources God places at our disposal, recognizing that we and they belong to God, and that we hold all of God’s benefits in trust as stewards, to be administered for the benefit of others.

We open ourselves transparently to one another in our faults, weakness, and suffering, accepting the vulnerability this entails in the light the cross sheds on God’s eternal vulnerability to the world’s pain. We do this in the conviction that God’s grace is sufficient, and God’s strength is made perfect in weakness and suffering (2 Cor 4:6-7, 12:9).

We practice interdependence in our relationships, rejecting the pretense of self-sufficiency. We are freed to “need” one another without co-dependence, and to give and receive from others, recognizing that our destinies are inseparably connected and we stand or fall together.

We willingly assume responsibility for one another, especially the weak, the marginalized, and the needy, placing our resources as needed at the disposal of others with whom we are inseparably connected as co-sharers of the divine generosity.

The overflow of God’s trinitarian love does not stop with the Christian community. The pattern of koinonia in the early church was one of ever-expanding circles of sharing, ever-broadening boundaries of participation, giving, vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility for one another, all humankind, and ultimately the whole creation. As the triune God’s extravagant love continues to overflow in the church today, we receive power to share the abundant love of God in the world, in word and deed. Thus the Lord adds to our numbers daily, as we grow in grace and embody God’s love in tangible deeds of self-giving before a world desperately in need of the Good News.

Celebrating Love

The days are coming, declares the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it (Amos 9:13).

The wine at the wedding had run out. And for some reason, Jesus’ mother goes to him to report this social faux pas. Jesus says, “Why are you bothering me, mother? My hour has not yet come.” But there just happened to be six huge stone water jars lying around—20 to 30 gallons each. Jesus has them filled with water and taken to the master of ceremonies. Then the celebrating really starts. Jesus has provided the best wine of the whole night—and an unbelievable amount of it! (Jn 2:1-10).

John tells us that this was the first “sign” that Jesus is truly the Son of God (Jn 2:11). Turning water used for washing and purification into an overabundance of wine. What a sign! We are astonished. But perhaps a little voice in us wonders, Couldn’t Jesus have done something more useful? Was this really the most responsible stewardship of his ministry resources? We live so seldom in a celebrating mode. We parcel out our time and energy; we calculate and juggle; we try to figure out what other people can do for us and in turn what they may be trying to get from us. Jesus’ extravagant gesture at the Cana wedding changes this whole landscape. It takes us from calculating to celebrating. Jesus’ sign is proof that the messianic age is dawning. The reign of God is near! And when this promised reign comes in fullness, it brings good things with it. It brings an abundance like you’ve never seen. It brings joy.
We celebrate the extravagance of God’s love for us already now. Even before we know our own name, our Maker claims us. Even before we knock, our Gracious Host opens the door for us. Even before we ask for food, our Good Shepherd spreads a table before us. The creative, redemptive, sustaining love of God takes the shape of extravagant hospitality towards all creation. We are intended to live joyfully and generously, assured of God's gracious abundance.

God’s extravagance towards us frees us to be generous, even extravagant, in our dealings with others. We can respect and celebrate the creation as God’s good gift, rather than depleting it for our own selfish purposes. We can enjoy our relationships with other people because we’re not always angling for what we can gain from them. God’s generosity towards us frees us to think about our time and money differently. We don’t have to spend our days anxiously building bigger barns to protect all our treasure. We can throw off the burden of ceaseless productivity, so we have time to keep Sabbath, time to devote to praising God and renewing our bodies and souls. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” Jesus says, “and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

The joy of the triune God is poured out on creation, so that all creation will rejoice. Salvation is feasting in the kingdom of God, where people will come from north, south, east, and west to sit at table together. Their celebration will satisfy the yearnings of body and spirit. Their fellowship will shatter boundaries of language and culture and past enmity. In Jesus’ fellowship meals, in the homes of Pharisees or of Gentiles, surrounded by thousands or alone with his disciples, hints of this joyful communion begin to heal the pain and brokenness of human life. His followers glimpse the glorious end that awaits them: celebrating together in God's new realm. The picture of Jesus we get at this extraordinary wedding at Cana tells us that God is not interested just in our failings and sorrows, but in our joys as well. Our lives, both now and forever, are to reflect the fullness of God’s perfect joy. “Everything is ready! Come to the banquet!” (Matt 22:4)

**Love’s Blessing**

Genesis 12:1-3; 22:1-19  

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.  I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . .”

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. . . . ‘Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.’”

The blessing of God is a vocation.  
It calls us, as it called Abram, to leave all that is familiar for what is yet to be revealed.  
It calls us, as it called Mary, to be a people who, by the favor of God, bear the divine Word, as it is conceived in us by the Holy Spirit.

“I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”
“Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”

The blessing of God requires of us a choice:

- to be blessing, as Abram,
- not for ourselves but for others;
- to ‘let it be’ with us, as with Mary,
- according to God’s word.

“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

“Then Simeon blessed them and said to . . . Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.’”

Being blessed is no private matter.

- It binds us to each other in ways none of us seeks, for beholding God’s blessing in another compels from us a choice.
- Like the neighbors of Abram we will respond with blessing or curse.
- Indifference is not an option.
- Like the neighbors of Mary’s son, in our response we disclose our hearts.
- God will be the judge.
- The blessed one, like Abram, must only remain true.

“[God] said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’”

“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Blessing comes with a price.

- Abram, now Abraham, must be willing to sacrifice the blessing as burnt offering to his God.
- The handmaid of the Lord, blessed among women will herself give birth to blessing, and it will tear apart her heart.

Being blessed is having our identity, who we are in relation to God and each other, formed by Love’s gifts, Love’s promises, Love’s claims.

Being blessed is being made blessing, an embodiment of the image in which we are made: giver, gift, giving; lover, beloved, love.
Conclusion: Our Hope

Our theological reflection begins and ends with the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ:

For God so loved the world…. (Jn 3:16).

Only divine love can give meaning to our preaching and our practice:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal…. (1 Cor 13:1).

In the end, it is that overflowing love that keeps us and holds us:

…neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39).

And so our prayers embody our hope that all may rejoice in the boundless love of the triune God:

[We] pray that, according to the riches of [God’s] glory,
[God] may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through the Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
[We] pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:16-19).
Biblical Citations:


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“Belonging to God: A First Catechism,” with Biblical References [approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998)].


The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions; Part II, Book of Order, 2004-2005, Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly. Numbered references to the Book of Confessions are noted as BC; Numbered references to the Directory for Worship in the Book of Order are noted as W-.


Historical Resources:


**Contemporary Resources:**


