

THREE-Ø-LOGY:

A Theological View on the Significance of the
number “Three” in relation to the
Biblical/Theological themes of the Trinity and the
Image of God

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ABSTRACT

This work seeks to develop an understanding where the importance of the number 'three' in the Bible is highlighted to reveal the deeper meaning of the Trinity and the Image of God. An understanding of the significance of 'three' in the Trinity and the Image of God, would enable us to know who we are as we live in the triangle of life in relationships with God and with others/creation. The brokenness of these relationships is the brokenness of the image of God in us, which means the loss of the 'threeness' of the Trinity from within us. The restoration of the 'threeness' of the Trinity in the image of God is indeed the work of the Trinity himself through reconciliation in the blood of the cross of Christ.

DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not used without due acknowledgment of any material that has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in another institution. I also declare that the work has not used any material, heard or read, without proper acknowledgment of the source.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents Rev. Esera and Elisapeta Palala

Thank you with Love Mum and Dad

And the Love and Forever of my Life..... Meleseleisa Afi'a

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world, numbers play a great deal in the decision-making process of individuals and organisations. Children are introduced to numbers from a young age within the educational system sparking a life-long relationship with numbers that include being an important element in the calculation of financial budgets, the time of day, or hours consumed at work. In the literal sense, numbers hold important meaning for many cultures. For example, in the western world the number 'thirteen' is considered by some to be an unlucky number with many people avoiding any association with it in order to avoid unfortunate occurrences that may occur in their lives. On the other side of this, the number 'seven' is referred to by many as the 'lucky number' and one that is sought after when it comes to choosing a number for various activities.¹

In the Bible, there are numerous instances where numbers appear to have symbolic meaning, that is, representing an idea or concept that holds so much more meaning than what is written on the page. This thesis focuses on the significance of the number Three in relation to two central biblical and theological themes, namely the Trinity and the Image of God, to highlight the importance of human relationships with God, with others and with creation. I seek to ask questions such as "Why are there Three Persons of the Trinity?" and "Is there any significance of the Three persons of the Trinity in the Image of God in man?" Questions like these have provided inspiration for me to conduct this research on the significance and deeper meaning of

¹Yili Zang, *Lucky Number, Unlucky Consumers*. (The Journal of Socio-Economics: Vol 40:5: 2011), p692-699.

the number ‘three’ within the scriptures especially in relation to these important themes.

The study on the concept of ‘Biblical Numerology’ reveals recent discussions surrounding the topic of numbers in scripture – whilst this concept has not been researched as vigorously as others in theological studies; it remains a highly-debated one dating back to ancient times.² By no means does this thesis claim to define the meaning of numbers in the word of God, but instead to offer an opportunity for further discussions on the significance of the number ‘three’ in other Biblical themes like Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three days Jesus spent in the grave, etc.

The Purpose of this Study:

The aim of this thesis is to focus on the use of the number ‘three’ in the nature and works of God portrayed in the Bible, particularly on its significance in the themes of the Trinity and the Image of God. This would lead to a theological meaning of the number ‘three’ in the themes selected which may speak to the life experiences of the Christians as well as the Church as a whole. Objectively, this thesis seeks to address the root cause of all the broken relationships in the world that we live in, not only within families and villages, but also in the wider context among nations as well as Churches and Religions. A better understanding of the significance of the number ‘three’ in the Trinity and the Image of God in man would reveal the failure of humans to understand their relationships with God, with others and with the whole of creation.

²E.W. Bullinger, *Numbers in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*, 4th ed. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd, 1921), p.107.

This work goes beyond the academic discussions regarding biblical numerology, to highlight the deeper meaning of the Three Persons in the Trinity as the power that holds together the whole of creation. The creation of man in the image of God, therefore, reveals the true nature of God's creation as an extension of the nature of God himself – the Three-ness of the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit within the whole of his creation.

Methodology

Data collected to answer the research questions of this work are published texts such as books, commentaries, academic articles, journals and dissertations by theologians. These sources are found in various institutional libraries and limited online databases. The data collection process for this research is limited to those texts found in the Malua Theological College Library, the Nelson Memorial Public Library, and various online academic journals. This is due to my limited access to other sources that are stored outside of Samoa. From the Bible, collected data in the form of events that relate to the number 'three' either literally or symbolically will also be used for the author's own interpretation and correlation with published commentaries on the topic.

As a Bachelor of Theology student at Malua Theological College, I will conduct analysis of collected data utilising a Theological Hermeneutical Interpretation approach. This methodology will provide a framework from which questions such as 'who was the writer?' and 'how significant are the words in this passage?' can be asked. In addition, various elements are important to the analysis of data such as the historical and cultural context of analysed events in the Bible. There is a fundamental

belief that, within hermeneutical study, there is one original interpretation - this will be kept in mind as I will dwell on the various possibilities of meaning that come with the study of biblical numerology. “Every work of art calls for interpretation, and every interpretation calls for an assessment of its conditions, which include our perspectives and our interpretative possibilities and limitations.”³

Summary of this Study:

This work will be divided into three chapters: Chapter One will explore the use of the number Three in the Bible in order to highlight its significance in relation to God. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament will be looked at to see the importance of the number Three in the history of God’s people, Israel, as well as the coming of God in Jesus Christ, in his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. In Chapter Two, a theological reflection on the significance of ‘Three’ will be developed to establish a possible theology of Three by looking into the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the Image of God in man. In the third chapter, I will explore the significance of a theology of Three in the life of the Church as well as the world and the whole of God’s creation.

³ Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press Ltd: 2002), p.3.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NUMBER “THREE” AND THE BIBLE

Introduction

The main task in this chapter is to seek an understanding in the significance of the number ‘three’ as used in the Bible. A view of the Old Testament and how the number ‘three’ appears in different aspects of the life and faith of the people of God, will be helpful in discerning its significance which may lead to a better understanding of God. The New Testament is filled with the many appearances of the number ‘three’ especially in relation to Jesus Christ which would help in revealing a deeper meaning of the number in understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1.1 The Number ‘Three’ in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, ‘three’ seems to be strongly associated with God. It appears to be a number that symbolizes wholeness or completeness. So when it is used in a context it is always in relation to God dealing with his people Israel or other nations as well. There is a significant sense of mystery surrounding ‘three’ in the Old Testament. Several instances will be viewed with the purpose of revealing the mysterious nature of ‘three’ in the Old Testament.

(a) Genesis 18:2

“He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him.” It is implied in the words, “and behold, three men stood in front of him,” that the men

suddenly appeared; they had not been seen approaching.⁴ Although hidden from Abraham, the presence of God was always felt which led to the realization of the truth and all the blessings involved. In other words, the three men who appeared to Abraham represented the wholeness and completeness of God. It was God himself visiting Abraham, the man of faith, to bless him. What stands out in this story, is the that Abraham's invitation for the three strangers to rest and dine with him showed great respect as if to God, although he learned later they were indeed the manifestation of God himself.

(b) Exodus 10:22-23

“So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days; they did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place for three days...” It is interesting to note that God, in verse 21, did not say it would be dark for three days. But in verses 22 and 23 as mentioned, darkness covered the whole of Egypt for three days. This implies that ‘three’ is associated with the nature of God himself. He gave darkness over Egypt, and it stayed for three days. If we follow the meaning that three stands for wholeness and completeness, then the darkness which covered Egypt was complete. It was “a thick darkness” which means a “darkness of darkness”, a complete gloom making movement an impossible task.⁵ Another interesting point in the story is the stretching out of the hand toward heaven. For the Hebrews and others as well, their God lives in the heavens. So the darkness now covering Egypt is from the God who dwells in the heavens.

⁴ Cuthbert A. Simson, “*The Book of Genesis*” in George Arthur Buttrick, et.al, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 617.

⁵ J. Coert Rylaardam, “*The Book of Exodus*” in George Arthur Buttrick, et.al, *The Interpreter's Bible*, 910.

(c) 1 Kings 17:21

“Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, ‘O Lord my God, let this child’s soul come into him again.’” The connection of the number ‘three’ with God in this story is clear. Although the act of stretching is done by the prophet, it was the prayer of faith for God’s intervention that is central. Thus stretching three times is a sign of total commitment and complete trust that God would answer in a miraculous way.

(d) Isaiah 20:3

“Then the Lord said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia...” Walking around naked and barefoot for three years is a sign of a prophet who is dedicated and committed to the work of God wholeheartedly and completely. Again a deep connection of ‘three’ with Isaiah’s life of obedience to God’s will, which resulted in the destruction of Egypt and Ethiopia by the Assyrians.

(e) Jonah 1:17

“But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” Taking up the meaning of three as wholeness and completeness, three days and three nights in the belly of the fish means a complete reorientation of Jonah’s life while facing the judgment of God for disobedience. Again the connection of ‘three’ and God, in a story about God and his unconditional love for the people of Nineveh, is very clear and it carries so much meaning in the calling of Jonah and the love of God for other nations.

(f) **Genesis 1:26a.**

“Let us make...in our image...according to our likeness.” There is no mention of the number ‘three’ in this story, but it is taken up here in order to establish a connection with the theological themes of the Trinity and the Image of God emphasised in this work. So much has been said about this plural as referring to the Trinity. In fact many Christian theologians and commentators have seen here a glimpse of what was so much later accepted as the doctrine of the Trinity.⁶ Atkinson quoted from St. Augustine as saying:

When I read that your Spirit moved over the waters, I catch a faint glimpse of the Trinity which you are, my God. For it was you the Father, who created heaven and earth in the Beginning of our Wisdom – which is your Wisdom, born of you, equal to you, and co-eternal with you – that is in your Son...Here, then, is the Trinity, my God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Creator of all creation.⁷

There is a question as to whom God is talking to, but Atkinson believes that it can be God talking to himself – a communion between the creative Word of God and the creative Spirit of God, in both of whom God’s Being is seen in his Creative Acts.⁸

It is becoming very clear that the number ‘three’ in the Old Testament is deeply associated with the nature of God, and it reveals the kind of wholeness and completeness found in God himself.

⁶ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1 – 11*, in J. A. Motyer et.al, BST Series (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 39.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

1.2 The Number Three in the New Testament

There is a continuity in meaning and significance of the number ‘three’ from the Old Testament into the New Testament, which shows that ‘three’ is commonly used as a number closely related to God throughout the Bible. In the New Testament, ‘three’ continues to reveal the mysterious nature of God in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Few references will be looked at to highlight a deeper meaning of ‘three’ for the purpose of this work.

(a) Matthew 15:32

“Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” The number ‘three’ here refers to the period of time the people have been with Jesus Christ. Being with Jesus for three days is quite a long time. Yet people were willing to spend time with Jesus rather than being somewhere else. Something mysterious have been experienced by the crowd as they were in communion with God himself in the person of Jesus Christ. As long as they are with Christ, they may express how they feel in a manner of wholeness and complete not with physical food but with the knowledge and wisdom of God.

(b) Matthew 27:63

“Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, after three days I will rise again.” These are the words of the chief priests and the Pharisees while accusing Jesus before Pilate of saying he will rise after three days. This was mainly for the purpose of securing and guarding the grave so that the words of Jesus would

not be fulfilled. The three days in the grave means a complete death, a point where no one can possibly come back to life again. While the guards were securing the people from outside getting into the grave to steal Jesus' body, they could not secure the Lord of life who was in the grave from coming out of it. In his resurrection, Jesus has defeated death and set the world free from its power. If the three days in the grave means complete death, then life in the resurrection of Christ is complete life – it is life eternal.

(c) Acts 9:9

“For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” Being without sight for three days is significant in the conversion of Paul. It is a sign of total submission to Christ's calling. It is complete surrendering of his being to the guidance of the Spirit and the Lord himself. A period of three days without sight can be seen as a transition from Paul's former life in the darkness of his own soul, to his new life in the light of the resurrected Christ. It means that Paul's calling started with darkness - the darkness of his own inability and foolishness. From within darkness shines the light of new life in Christ and therefore the beginning of wisdom and strength for the task of serving the Lord.

1.3 The Life of Jesus Christ

There are important occurrences in the New Testament where a sequence of 'threes' is seen in different aspects of the life of Jesus Christ. It is important to note that the actual number 'three' is not mentioned, but the number of occurrences in 'threes' implies the importance and significance of the number three in the life and work of Christ.

The Father spoke from heaven three times during Christ's ministry. Matthew 3:17, Matthew 17:5, and John 12:28. Three characteristics of a shepherd were applied to Jesus: The good shepherd: Speaking of His death (John 10:14-15). The great shepherd: Speaking of His resurrection (Hebrews 13:20). The chief shepherd: Speaking of His future glory (1 Peter 5:4). There are three appearances of Jesus mentioned: In the past: To take away sin (Hebrews 9:26). In the present: At God's right hand (Hebrews 9:24). In the future: To those who look for Him (Hebrews 9:28). There were also three disciples who witnessed Christ's transfiguration. Three disciples went into the garden to pray with Jesus. The Lord asked three times for the impending cup of His suffering to pass, but only if it was His Father's will. Peter denied the Lord three times. Pilate sought three times to let Jesus go. It was the third hour when they crucified Jesus.

There were three crosses, three men crucified, and writing in three different languages on the cross of Jesus. Jesus was in the heart of the earth for three days and nights. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter and questioned him three times regarding his love for Him. Christ holding a three-fold office as king, prophet, and priest (Deuteronomy 17:15; 18:5 and Isaiah 6:3).

1.4 The Prophetic Significance of Three in the Book of Revelation

In the book of Revelation, the most common number to occur is the number 'seven', however, the number 'three' is a close second. The following examples are noted: An angel will pronounce three woes to those living on earth to warn them of trials to come (Revelation 8:13). The murdered bodies of the two witnesses will lie openly in

the streets of Jerusalem for three days before they are resurrected (Revelation 11:7-12). Three unclean spirits will be allowed to deceive the whole world (Revelation 16:13-16). The New Jerusalem will be square, with three gates on each side (Revelation 21:13).

1.5 The Divine Commission

The number 'three' is also related to the divine mandate given to believers by Jesus. The commission has a three-fold manifestation of the Godhead which consists of three persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are the power behind our commission. Our three-fold mandate is to teach the Gospel to people of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then teach them to observe all things that are commanded in God's Word. Three times in the New Testament, we are told to walk worthy of this divine calling: (i) Ephesians 4:1-3, (ii) Colossians 1:10, and (iii) 1 Thessalonians 2:12.

Summary

When all the occurrences of the number 'three' in the Bible are studied, one could say with confidence that its symbolism conveys the idea of "completeness."⁹ Furthermore, the number 'three' conveys this concept because of the nature of common triads with which everyone is familiar with. For example:

Beginning – Middle - End

Father – Mother - Child

Heaven – Earth - Sea

Morning - Noon – Night

Right – Middle - Left¹⁰

I have reached a theological view that ‘three’ forms the completeness of God, with the sense of ‘Divine fullness’ as the number ‘three’ signifies life, Spirit, New Life and Resurrection. This develops ‘three’ in the Triune God as being ‘Divine fullness in unity, the number of God.’

There is a wider interpretation which merges life and the present world within the nature of God’s Trinitarian influence. Theologically, ‘three’ symbolizes the Divine fullness that unites the triune God with humanity and with creation, which defines completeness. As God is understood as completeness, humankind is always looking for ways and avenues in order to gain and feel God’s completeness, searching and exploring the attributes of God. It is evident that God gives humanity completeness through Salvation, and this act of kindness is divine and can only define how God is seen as unity for the whole of his creation.

⁹[Http.www.harvestine.org](http://www.harvestine.org) 2015: “*Understanding Biblical Numbers*” Harvest International Network : (access date: May 21 2017), 11f.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.121.

CHAPTER TWO

THREE-Ø-LOGY

Introduction

Three-Ø-logy¹ is used in this thesis to identify the centrality of God in this effort, to highlight the significance of ‘three’ in the biblical message, and to develop a theology of ‘three’. The “Ø” is a Greek letter commonly used as a symbol for God; “logy” is a transliteration of *logos* which means word, study, conversation. So Three-Ø-logy means in this work, the study of God in the light of the number ‘three’, or it can be simply put, a theology of ‘three’.

When ‘three’ is looked at numerically, then it is simply the number that is two more than one, or the number that is one more than two. In other words, ‘three’ could easily be looked at as a number for communion, wholeness and completeness. In this sense, one could say that ‘three’ is an appropriate number to signify God in his wholeness and completeness, as well as the communion within the Triune God. Therefore, ‘three’ can be referred to as God’s number as seen clearly in the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

¹ I have coined the word Three-ø-logy as my own original idea/reference.

2.1 Three in the Doctrine of the Trinity

There is not enough space in this work to give a full account of the doctrine of the Trinity. The focus, therefore, is on the meaning of ‘three’ referring to the persons of the Trinity. The number ‘three’ is a significant element of the understanding of the Trinity which is the Christian belief that there is one God, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is also understood as the triune God, in other words, Three-in-One. Whilst there are three elements to this understanding of the Trinity, there is a common mistake that people make in defining the Trinity as being a God who is ‘three’ individuals in one, or even three Gods joined together as one. This work takes the stance that the understanding of the number ‘three’ in the doctrine of the Trinity can be explained as being one God where three distinct persons – the Father, Son, Holy Spirit – are actually, the one and same God.² The ‘three’ persons are regarded as equally divine and of equal status.³ Furthermore, the scriptures states that these three persons are the one and only God.

2.2 The Triune God of the Bible

There are only two verses in the entire New Testament where a Trinitarian formula is seen. One is Matthew 28:19 of the commission given by Christ to his disciples, and the other is 2 Corinthians 13:13 in the blessings given by the apostle Paul to the Christians in Corinth. But Alister E. McGrath⁴ believes these verses are not enough to constitute a doctrine of the Trinity. Thus the ultimate grounds of the foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity are to be found:

² John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of the Numbers in the Bible*, (Michigan: Baker Book House, Grand Rapids: 1991), p.121.

³ Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 2011), p.17.

“In the pervasive pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit”.⁵ It is clearly found in the New Testament writings very close connections between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Very often these three are linked together in New Testament passages as part of a whole. “The totality of God’s saving presence and power can only, it would seem, be expressed by involving all three elements.”⁶

McGrath believes that the same Trinitarian structure is found in the Old Testament. He speaks of “Three major ‘personifications’ of God can be discerned within its pages, which naturally lead on to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.”⁷ So he speaks of Wisdom, the word of God and the Spirit of God which “point to a pattern of divine activity and presence in and through creation, in which God is both immanent and transcendent”.⁸ The true nature of the Trinity is clearly seen in the activities of God seen throughout the history of Israel, life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the early Church. God’s purpose for the salvation not only of Israel but of the world was seen clearly in all the activities where all the ‘three’ persons of the Trinity were involved.

The Triune God is described in various ways that seem to be grouped in threes. The number ‘three’ is symbolical in the description of His triune character: He is omnipresent – He is everywhere (Psalm 139:7-12), He is omnipotent – an almighty God

⁴ Ibid., p.238.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.239.

(Job 11:7), and He is omniscient – He knows everything (Psalm 69:5, I John 3:20). In the book of Exodus, there is also another three attributes that highlight the triune God – goodness, graciousness, and merciful (Exodus 33:18-19).

2.3 The Triune Nature in the World

This refers to the fact that God in his nature as the Triune God is present in his creation always. As Jurgen Moltmann puts it, “through his cosmic Spirit, God the Creator of heaven and earth is present *in* each of his creatures and *in* the fellowship of creation which they share.”⁹ Moltmann believes that the triune God dwells in his creation giving himself for the wellbeing of every creature of his creation. In his own words, “The God who in the Spirit dwells in his creation is present to every one of his creatures and remains bound to each of them, in joy and sorrow.”¹⁰ The love that unites the Trinity is always part of God’s creation as he not only creates, but seeks to reconcile and redeems through Jesus Christ. Then in the power of the Spirit, “God is himself present in his creation – present in his reconciliation and his redemption of that creation.”¹¹

With all that being said about the Trinity, the true nature of God is the love that holds the community of the Trinity together in One, which is overflowing into the whole of his creation. It seems so clearly now that it was God’s purpose from the very beginning that this love within himself be shared by all the creatures of creation. With love, the ‘three’ persons of the Trinity live in harmony and peace in the Godhead, and working together in bringing unity in love and true peace into creation. For Moltmann, “If the

⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.15.

¹¹ Ibid.

Creator is himself present in his creation by virtue of the Spirit, then his relationship to creation must rather be viewed as an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal and many-sided relationships.”¹² In other words, the nature of God which is love is seen clearly in relationships, not only within himself, but also within the whole of his creation. Relationships of *mutuality* as ‘indwelling’, ‘sympathizing’, ‘participating’, ‘accompanying’, ‘enduring’, ‘delighting’ and glorifying’, which describe a “cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings.”¹³

2.4 Three in the Image of God

“Let us make... in our image...according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26a). The significance of the ‘three’ in this reference has been touched upon in the previous chapter. Here, the emphasis will be on the meaning of being created in the image of God as the Triune God of the Bible. There is so much study being done on the image of God in human being. Again there is no space available in this work for a detailed study of the topic. The central concern in this paper is to highlight the understanding that the significance of ‘three’ in the nature of the Trinity becoming a reality in the life of human beings.

2.4.1 Image of God as Relationship

There are several interpretations of the image of God in its development both in the biblical scholarship as well as in the history of theology itself. Some believe that the image of God is seen in the human beings’ upright stature in a physical resemblance of God. Others believe that the image of God is found in the rational nature of human beings. There are those who believe that the image of God is the dominion given to

¹² Ibid., p.14.

human beings over the earth. There are also those who put emphasis on human freedom as the image of God in human beings; together with Daniel L. Migliore and others, this work concentrates on the meaning of the image of God as human life in relationship with God, with others and with the rest of God's creation.¹⁴ Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This means that to be human is to live freely and joyfully in relationships of mutual respect and love.¹⁵ Atkinson on the same line of argument refers to Westermann who argues that "human beings are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God".¹⁶

There is a strong connection of the nature of the Trinity as relationship within Godself - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, with the image of God in human beings. That is, if God is relational in nature, then human beings as the image of God must be relational in nature as well. Human beings must reflect in their lives the true image of God – which is love in relationships with God, with others and with the whole creation of God.

In Jesus, the eternal Son is revealed in the flesh. Jesus showed and expressed 'three' within the image of God by living in relationships – to his Father, to his parents and family, to his friends and even his enemies. He made the image of God visible and touchable in all God's mercy and goodness. He forgave sin, introduced new teachings going beyond the Law and tradition, things which belonged exclusively to God.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2014), 144f.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Notwithstanding, as creatures are the image and likeness of God, then God has to be absolute openness, supreme presence, total immediacy, eternal transcendence and infinite communion.¹⁷

¹⁶ Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1 – 11*, p.37.

¹⁷ Leonard Boff, *Trinity and Society*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p.131.

CHAPTER THREE

SALVATION AS RESTORATION OF THREE

Introduction

It has been the aim of this work from the outset to develop a theology of ‘three’ based on the threeness of God in the Trinity as well as in the Image of God in humankind. A task that is made possible by establishing a biblical perspective to view the significance of the number ‘three’ in the life and history of the people of God in the Old Testament, as well as the life and work of Jesus Christ. Here in this final chapter, I wish to clarify my personal view that the loss of the deeper meaning of the threeness of the Triune God, has led to the brokenness of the true image of God in humankind. Consequently, this has led to the brokenness of the Triangle of Life that was there right from the beginning when God created all things.

3.1 The Threeness of God in the Triangle of Life

The Triangle of Life is the reality that each and every Christian experiences in life all the time. A Christian lives in relationship with God and with others (including the rest of creation). “It is about relationship that God has towards us, and – in a derivative way, of our relationship of sonship to the Father.”¹⁸ Our relationship with God as sons and daughters of God is always understood as seen in our relationships with others and

¹⁸ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11*, p.38.

with creation as a whole. This is because God has created all things through Christ and for Christ:

For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

For Paul, God in Christ created all things through him and for him. The whole of creation including human beings are for God himself. The ‘all things’ here includes every single thing created by God in the heavens and on earth. Even numbers and their significances, animals and plants, the birds and the air, the sun, the moon and the stars, are all part of the things created by God for God.

With Three-Ø-logy, we can see the significance of the threeness of the community of the Godhead being reflected in the whole of creation. The nature of the Trinity being part of human life as images of God and therefore flowing naturally through human beings to other things of creation. The threeness of the Creator becoming the threeness of the whole creation through human beings. The problem, however, is the failure of human beings to understand the significance of being created in the image of God the Trinity. Sin is understood in this work as failure to reflect the true image of God to others and to the whole of creation. That is, the failure to maintain the threeness of life or the triangle of life with God and with others.

3.2 Salvation in the Threeness of Christ

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:19-20). The threeness of Christ is seen in the way he lived his life in obedience and in love as he sought to do the will of

his Father. The coming of God to dwell within his creation is described by Paul as through Christ in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. That fullness of God is the fullness of the community of the Trinity. “For Paul there was nothing whatever of the Godhead that was not in Christ; the full complement of divine attributes is to be found in him.”¹⁹

Salvation for Paul is reconciliation. In verse 19 Paul tells us that nothing of the fullness of God is lacking in Christ, and in verse 20, he asserts that nothing in the universe is outside the range of God’s reconciling work in Christ.²⁰ From the perspective of this work, the complete threeness of the Trinity dwells in Christ, therefore the reconciliation that Christ would achieve is for the whole threeness of the universe to be restored. That is humankind would be able to live in peace and harmony with God, with others and with all things of creation.

3.3 Threeness of the Cross of Christ

In my view, the threeness of God and the threeness of creation as a whole are brought together by the symbol of the cross of Christ. The reconciliation between humankind and God was through the blood of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the reconciliation between the threeness of God, the Trinity, and the broken threeness of the image of God in humankind as well as the broken threeness of the triangle of life in the whole of creation. There is certainty in the reconciliation brought by God through the blood of the cross of Christ because of the cross being the symbol of ‘three’ standing in the depth of the earth, reaching the height of the heavens, and embracing the width of the whole

¹⁹ R. C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, in John R. W. Stott et.al., “The Bible Speaks Today,” (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, 1980), p.53.

²⁰ Ibid., p.55.

of creation. In other words, the death of Christ, the blood of the cross, has reconciled the earth and the heavens, and the whole of creation. Salvation is clearly understood as the fruit of the threeness of God being crucified on the threeness of the cross, reconciling all things to God, restoring the threeness of God in all things.

3.4 Threeness of the Church of Christ

Threeness of the Church, starts from the very beginning in the Sacrament of Baptism, in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, as commission by the Lord Himself (Matt 28). The nature of the Church is justified by the threeness, the identity of the triangular essences of the Trinity, which is the sign and development of the restoration of God within humankind.

According to Karl Rahner, the Church is not the society of those who alone are saved, but the sign of the salvation of those who, as far as its historical and social structure are concerned, do not belong to it. By their profession of faith, their worship and life, the human beings in the Church form as it were the one expression in which the hidden grace promised and offered to the whole world emerges from the abysses of the human soul into the domain of history and society.²¹

This is the wholeness and the completeness of the Trinity within the Church. The presence of God is significant and identified in every dimension. The image of God is profound within his creation and how faith with reconciliation is deeply restored through salvation.

²¹ Rahner, Karl. *The Christian of the Future*, (NewYork: Herder and Herder, 1967). p.83-84.

CONCLUSION

In this theological endeavour, I have come to realize the importance of Biblical numerology in the study of theology. In understanding the significance of the number 'three' in connection with the Trinity and then the Image of God in humankind, so much light has been shone into the depths of these theological themes, enabling us as Christians and as human beings to know who we are. In knowing who we really are, that we live in relationships with God and with others together with the rest of creation, in the triangle of life, in the power of 'three' of the Triune God, would certainly give us joy and peace in life. However, it also comes with responsibilities of maintaining and enriching the relationships we have with God and others.

The brokenness of relationships causes divisions and even death. Three-Ø-logy would contribute theologically in highlighting the significance of 'three' as the number of God, in the wholeness and completeness of his love, bringing joy and peace into relationships. With further study of Three-Ø-logy, all things of God's creation, including Samoa and the rest of the world would be able to live responsibly for the wellbeing of others and the whole creation.

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Note: All Biblical text and references were taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) The Holy Bible.