Social Work and Theology: Healing Through the Trinity

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Theology is, in many respects, a human-service oriented discipline. It is, by content, a study of one who cannot be fully known. Yet the purpose of such study ultimately seeks to enhance the worship experience, by inviting more challenging, intimate reflections on the One who is worthy of worship. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen suggests that burnout in social and human service workers is directly related to an inability to grieve with their clients.¹ The result of this inability to grieve is emotional overload, which leads to many well-intentioned, gifted professionals stepping away from, instead of toward, the people they serve. Sometimes this stepping away comes in the form of resignation from posts; frequently it manifests in abrupt, short-sided, hurried service, which leaves the client feeling misunderstood, burdensome, and often angry.

Suffice it to say, this strategy does not accomplish the goal of the client to get help, or the goal of the professional to serve well. Theologians are subject to the same concerns regarding burnout. If burnout is related to a lack of ability to grieve, the question remains, what should theologians be grieving? I propose that theologians, and all social and human service workers, must grieve the denial of relationality as the context for seeking healing and wholeness. The basis of work which invites others to heal must be Trinitarian. The relationship between healing and the Trinity rests in three distinct categories: Healing happens in the context of relationship; Healing happens in the context of narrative; Healing pursues oneness.

Healing happens in the context of relationship. The very essence of the Trinity is relationship, expressed in humanity through the sociality of human nature.² The Trinity is a social entity, in which there exists intra-Trinitarian relationships. The Father relates to the Son,

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¹ Rachel Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom, 232
² Stanley Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self, 14-15
the Son relates to the Spirit, and so on. These relationships existed and continue to exist apart from the creation of humanity. Humanity bears the image of God in the capacity and need for sociality. In this way, relationship becomes the avenue for the experience of transformation. Consider Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, entering human history. God had relationship with his chosen people prior to the incarnation. In the midst of a relationship needing healing, that of God and his wayward bride, God enters human history in the form of Jesus Christ. The ontological reality of Jesus compels the idea that healing takes place in the context of relationship, both human and divine. Humanity needs relationship with the divine for healing; yet humanity also needs relationship with humanity, as Jesus brings both the human and the divine to the incarnation. To eliminate one in lieu of the other is, in effect, to say there is some aspect of Jesus we do not need.

Healing happens in the context of narrative. Narrative is the arena in which people will be drawn to Christ. It was the arena for the first-century church, and it remains so today. The telling and hearing of the gospel story is, in some form, at the heart of every story of transformation. The gospel story is the story of the Trinity. It is often understood as the story of Jesus. Yet, Jesus is only one component of the story. There is the Father who sends, and the Spirit who remains. Indeed, the story belongs to the Trinitarian Godhead in full. Robert Coles, in his book “The Call of Stories,” speaks of the need to remember who owns the stories we are given. As a psychiatrist, he is challenged with remembering that the story offered to him by patient is an attempt by the patient to be known and the truth of their life to be revealed. This is no less than the goal of the gospel story: for God to be known and the truth of Triune Godhead to

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3 Ibid.
4 Robert Coles, The Call of Stories, 7-8
be revealed. The truth of the Triune Godhead invites healing because it is the source for reconciliation.

Healing pursues oneness. The pursuit of oneness is a quest for reconciliation between that which is and that which is longed for, in the name of that which can be. In the context of healing, that which is, as the reality of a given moment, in some fashion violates that which was longed for. The untimely death of a spouse violates the desire for a long life together. Sexual abuse by a parent violates the longing for a safe, nurturing relationship. The result is a need for healing. The schism between what is and what is longed for, when reconciled, creates the space for that which can be: wholeness. Only when the schism is identified can it be reconciled, and only when reconciled can one be propelled forward, further into that which can be.

Dan Allendar speaks of faith, hope and love in terms of past, present and future. Faith is the realm of the past, which must be reconciled with the realm of love, which is the present. Hope is the realm of the future, which is made possible by the reconciliation of the past and present. The language may be different, yet the theological presumption is the same, that is healing occurs through engagement of relationship and story, not isolated from it.

The language of healing is Triune. Healing is the pursuit of oneness, and the pursuit of oneness requires recognition and engagement of that which is, was longed for, in the name of what can be. Oneness requires the three; the three result in oneness. Everything which is true about God is true only in and through the reality of His triunity. Protestant theologian Karl Barth begins the effort of developing his doctrine of God in developing his Trinitarian understanding. In doing so, his theology of the person and work of

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5 Dan Allender, Psychological Theory and Technique Lecture, Mars Hill Graduate School, October 2002
6 Ibid.
Jesus Christ, which is foundational to nearly all of Barth’s theological work, flows from the Trinity; in Jesus, the source of revelation, even revelation itself flows from the reality of the Triune God.⁷ For Barth, the unity of God rests in the truth of His Triunity.⁸ From this, Barth proclaims the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as the persons of God within the Godhead; three as one.⁹

The revelation of God cannot be separate from the actuality of God. God is Revealer, as the One who sends (Father). God is Revealed, as the One who is sent (Son). God is Revelation, as the act of revealing by the Revealer through the Revealed one (Spirit). This triunity results in the undeniable conclusion that God must be one in order to be three; and God must be three in order to be one.

Within the Godhead, the Trinitarian relationships define and affirm the reality of the Trinity. The Father is the father because he sends His Son; therefore the Son establishes and confirms the Father. The Son is the Son because he was sent by the Father; therefore the Father establishes and confirms the Son. The Spirit is the Spirit because of the act of Revelation which derives from the relational reality between the Father and the Son; therefore the Spirit establishes and confirms the activity within the Godhead. As with Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity, the experience of healing is confirmed by the relationship between the components, and is actual only when all components are represented in the process.

In relating theology of the Trinity to the healing process, there are profound implications for the social and human service field. Questions of boundaries and professional distance are often considered in light of trying to assess how much of a relationship is appropriate. The implication, in this line of reasoning, is that anything under or up to this imaginary ethical line is

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⁷ Barth, Karl, Church Dogmatics 1/1, 372
⁸ Ibid., 354-355
⁹ Ibid., 304-305
okay, so long as it is not crossed. I propose that this is the wrong line of thinking, in applying the Trinity. It is not how much we can do that we ought to be asking; rather it is who I am to be with, to and for this person. The answer will vary with each person; the measure of consistency is the same question with each and every individual.

Perhaps one of the greatest temptations faced by those in social work is to believe we can, and should, fix those who have come to us for help. When we try to “fix” people, it assumes, “I know what is best. To get better is to become like me.” Yet, it appears that the Trinity does not result in God “fixing humanity,” but entering our story, becoming like us. Suppose the goal of social and human services is simply to know the other, and seek to be known. There has never been any more “Other” than humanity was to God. Yet, there is every indication that in the economy of the Godhead, the presence of the Other is longed for and pursued, at all cost.

Recalling Henri Nouwen’s book on Christian leadership, he cautions that the temptations to be relevant, powerful and popular cloud the capacity for true servant leadership. In helping professions, what does it mean to serve, while laying down the desire to be relevant? While surrendering the power often handed over by clients and institutional structures? While dying to the desire to be more popular and better loved by clients than Jesus himself? It means abandoning the desire to fix, in exchange for more impractical desires to love; to refuse power that ultimately makes the helper more responsible for bringing healing than the client is for pursuing it; and embracing the humble reality that being well-liked usually means conformity, while being well-loved means loving others and allowing them to love in return.

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10 Robert Lupton, Theirs is the Kingdom, 67
11 Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus
The Trinity is the foundation of the healing experience, and of all work to invite others to heal, because the Trinity is the basis for our relationality; it is the basis for the healing narrative which transforms us; it is the call to oneness, best summed up in the words of Mother Theresa: “I have learned the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is no more hurt, only more love.”12

12 Mother Theresa, A Simple Path
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Bibliography of Works Referenced and Cited


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