

“Well, the Very Idea!!!”  
Dr. Bob Hawkins

A popular adage usually attributed (incorrectly, it seems) to Mark Twain observes: “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” Whoever crafted that clever bit of wisdom describes our perilous and rocky journey from infancy into maturity, moving from concrete thought toward a growing ability to think abstractly and engage in creative speculation or association. Certainly, developmental challenges can compromise a person’s ability to engage in abstract thought. However, the anonymous sage who spoke with Twain-like humor captured the stubbornness and unbending certitude we all display as we struggle to establish our own independence and sense of authority. Generosity of spirit and the willingness to acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities of life are hard-won signs of maturity. British mystery writer and theologian Dorothy L. Sayers observed in *Gaudy Night* (1935), “The young were always theoretical; only the middle-aged could realize the deadliness of principles.”

As we approach The Festival of the Holy Trinity this coming Sunday, Sayers helps us to draw close to God’s eternal mystery by mustering our own “...generosity of spirit and willingness to acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities of life.” Theological concrete thinking can backfire all too often, turning us into concrete blockheads who grasp at tidy, black-and-white facts and figures about God who nevertheless will be known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Worship scholars identify Trinity Sunday as an “*idea* festival.” Most of the Church’s observances are grounded in *events*: Christ’s birth or resurrection, proto-martyr Stephen’s death by stoning, anniversaries of a congregation’s founding, rally day, Reformation, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, or the individual and communal celebrations for ALL of God’s wide-flung SAINTS throughout time. The scholars’ category - idea festival - may be true, but it runs the risk of forming us to think about God as an “idea,” a collection of factoids about the Godhead, the Incarnate Son, and the elusive Holy Spirit.

Our fact-based inclinations regarding attempts to explain the ultimately unexplainable Trinity have indeed resulted in some mighty peculiar answers, some which have caused folks to flirt inadvertently with heresy on occasion. Luther’s *Small Catechism* (1529), the prototype of well presented, brief presentations of faithful belief and practice, has one distinct drawback. The reformer’s frequent questions – “What is this?” “What does this mean?” “Where is this written?” – become the unintended encouragement to be satisfied with *Reader’s Digest* style concrete, black/white, tidy, bottom-line answers with no room for nuance and on-going discovery. It is not surprising that there are to date over two-hundred-million copies sold of over 2500 different titles of *For Dummies* books world wide, wise Wikipedia tells us.

Even though Luther’s *Small Catechism* discussions are ...*sure and worthy of full acceptance*, to invoke I Timothy 1:15, it is helpful to turn to Luther’s *Large Catechism* also appearing in 1529 [and available for free downloading on your local computer or I-pad]. The *Large Catechism* gives Luther the necessary room to demonstrate his genius for “...generosity of spirit and the willingness to acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities of life.” More importantly, his presentation of the Holy Trinity [*Large Catechism*: Creed] is far more concerned with introducing God’s people to the

PERSONS of the Trinity, persons who are intimately bound to one another in eternally abiding, loving relationships, persons who together have created, redeemed, and sanctified us to abide with them and all God's people forever.

Several excerpts from Luther's cordial introduction to the Holy Three-in-One are worth considering as we wrestle with the mega-idea of TRINITY this coming Sunday. They remind us that to draw near to the Trinity is to draw near to the holy life of love God is determined to share, not simply to a cluster of right answers to right and holy questions. Luther writes of the Godhead who has created "...heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." He concludes the first section: "For here we see how the Father has given to us himself with all creation and has abundantly provided for us in this life apart from the fact that he has also showered us with inexpressible eternal blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit." Turning to the Incarnate Son, Luther continues: "...the little word "Lord" simply means the same as Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there." "...we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart." Luther concludes, "...the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the" life everlasting. That is, [the Spirit] first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ." Mercy, what a busy and active trio!

Think of this Sunday's festival, perhaps, as a party given by people who love each other dearly and hope and pray others will join in, too. The party is ever-growing until all gather at last around the banquet table of heaven. And yes, each one of us is a part, Luther reminds us: "I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings [this holy community] possesses. I was brought into it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word..." What an idea, indeed!