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INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN A. SCHWARZ ON THREEFOLD REVELATION OF GOD

Christian Andreas Schwarz is a German author, lecturer and researcher. He is the founder and president of Natural Church Development (NCD International). He started his journey towards natural church development early in his life, influenced by the ministry of his father, a Lutheran church superintendent. On his 18th birthday he was diagnosed with an incurable disease, which has had a strong influence on his priorities, plans, and the intensity of activities in the years to follow. An unexpected healing eight years after the diagnosis intensified his decision to invest the rest of his life into the cause of helping churches get healthy.

Schwarz has written various books focused on church development and life transformation. His most popular books have been published in the NCD Discipleship Resources series, with five titles so far (The 3 Colors of Leadership, The 3 Colors of Ministry, The 3 Colors of Your Spirituality, The 3 Colors of Community, The 3 Colors of Love). His books have been published in 40 languages. The major strategic building blocks of NCD are the eight quality characteristics of healthy churches, the six growth forces, the minimum-factor strategy, and the Trinitarian Compass.

A central part of NCD is a diagnostic tool called the NCD Church Survey, a resource that enables churches to precisely assess their present quality and to identify the area of greatest need (“minimum factor”). As a second step, the church conducting a survey is supported by specifically designed tools and coaching to increase its quality in the respective area. After a given time, the church conducts a repeat-profile to monitor the actual progress. According to NCD theory, this investment in the quality or health of the church is the factor that has the strongest correlation to numerical growth.

JACL: At some point in your career as a Christian writer, you have made a ground-breaking discovery about the triune God. Would you like to tell us about it?

Schwarz: I wouldn't relate this discovery so much to me as a Christian writer, but to my ongoing work with leaders of diverse cultural and denominational backgrounds. The writing about it came only secondarily. After having studied tens of thousands of pages with theological explorations on the Trinity, I

was puzzled by the fact that the majority of theologians would consider the Trinity as the central Christian doctrine, but I could never detect that the respective teachings had any visible impact on practical issues. Most would regard the doctrine of the Trinity as theologically extremely important, but practically not overly relevant. High and dry, we could say.

In the midst of preparing for a complicated conference—complicated because it encompassed people from very different, even contradicting, theological backgrounds—I saw in front of my inner eyes a representation of how the triune God relates to us. This image instantaneously explained the struggles we encounter in our churches, and it also served as a compass to constructively deal with these struggles. God has revealed Himself in three different ways—in Creation, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit—and each of these three revelations corresponds to a specific dimension of our lives, encompassing head, hands and heart. When we get connected to God in all three areas, we will think differently, we will act differently, and we will feel differently. Connecting to God in a Trinitarian way shapes everything that we do on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and all the other days of the week, and not just at the moment we enter church.

Since I have spoken and written about the balance that a proper understanding of the triune God brings to our personal and corporate lives, some people assume that I am personally a perfect model of the spiritual balance we are talking about. But I am not.

JACL: How has this new understanding changed your personal life?

Schwarz: Since I have spoken and written about the balance that a proper understanding of the triune God brings to our personal and corporate lives, some people assume that I am personally a perfect model of the spiritual balance we are talking about. But I am not. I am just as imbalanced as everyone else. However, the crucial point is this: Rather than teaching about my own state of “unbalancedness,” in other words, defending my own deficits, I have started to continually bring more balance to my life, by becoming more radical in each of the three areas mentioned.

JACL: Balanced and radical—that sounds like a contradiction.

Schwarz: That’s exactly the point. Radical in the biblical sense means to con-

nect back to the *radix*, to the “root,” and this root is the triune God. There is no problem in being “radical,” but there is a problem in the pursuit of being radical in an imbalanced way. When we strive to become radical in all three areas simultaneously, we are shaped by the kind of radicalness that has been modeled by Jesus. Balance without radicalness—that could result in foggy compromises, in the attempt to formulate ecumenical agreements on the basis of the least common denominator, which kill all passion and make every participant less effective. Radicalness without balance, on the other hand, results in living out a part of biblical truth—which is great—but then positioning that partial truth against other biblical truths, with all of the disastrous effects that inevitably follow from such an approach. In Natural Church Development (NCD) we consistently teach the goal of “radical balance,” another way of rendering spiritual health or maturity.

JACL: There are some Christians today who claim that the Trinitarian view of God is unbiblical and deceitful. How would you respond to that?

Balance without radicalness—that could result in foggy compromises, in the attempt to formulate ecumenical agreements on the basis of the least common denominator, which kill all passion and make every participant less effective.

Schwarz: I would respond in two ways. First, I can understand some of that criticism. Neither the term “Trinity” nor the doctrine of the Trinity as it was formulated in the fourth century—God as one substance and three persons—are to be found in Scripture. This doesn’t mean that they are contrary to the Bible—I am convinced they are not!—but in biblical times these categories were basically absent. People simply *experienced* God in three different ways, without having a sophisticated system for interpreting these experiences. Those with a Jewish background knew that the Lord is one, and they prayed to this one God, the Creator of heaven and earth. At the same time they found themselves praying to Jesus, and they experienced God in the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit as God. Only later they started to reflect on how all of these plentiful experiences relate to each other: What does all of that mean? Are we praying to three different Gods? Certainly not! But what is it, then? How do Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other? These processes finally lead to the fourth-century formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. However, much of what has been written about the Trinity, starting with the fourth century, has become increasingly speculative, abstract, and sometimes self-con-

tradictory, if not confusing. So I do understand people who have problems with the doctrine of the Trinity as they have encountered it in the past.

However, in my books I do not contribute to any speculations on how the three entities of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—relate to each other. This is an important topic, but it is not the topic we are called to explore in the process of church development. Rather, we ask, “How do Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to us?” Or put the other way around, “How do we relate to the triune God?” With that focus, we are not only on solid biblical ground, but we have at the same time a helpful compass of bringing health to our individual and corporate lives.

The fragmentation in Christianity is chiefly the result of individuals and whole churches opting for their “favorite God” within the Trinity, so to speak.

JACL: What is the point of believing in an eternal, equal triune God?

Schwarz: Let me put it into rather drastic words: It is a question of whether we pray together with the Jews and the early Christians—“The Lord our God, the Lord is *one*”—or whether we create and nurture a mental image of a small pantheon of three Gods, from which every group, based on theological preferences, can choose their respective favorite God. And this is what actually has happened. The fragmentation in Christianity is chiefly the result of individuals and whole churches opting for their “favorite God” within the Trinity, so to speak. While *theologically* sticking to the oneness of God, psychologically we have destroyed this oneness. Of course, none of us can destroy the one God, but what we can destroy is the possibility for us humans to experience God as one. We communicate fragmented images of God that result in fragmented churches, and finally in fragmented human lives. Sometimes we have become so much accustomed to that fragmented way of living that we start to defend it theologically. We seriously believe that this is what Christianity should be like.

JACL: One thing is a confessional view of the matter and/or an intellectual proposition, and the other thing is everyday life and its issues. What practical difference does living in the reality of the triune God make in the life of a leader?

Schwarz: Confessional and intellectual propositions are important. We find them in Scripture, they have been produced throughout church history, and

they can be helpful in our churches today. What we have to focus on, however, is the relationship between these doctrinal statements we believe in and the challenges of our daily lives. The understanding of the one God who has revealed Himself in three different ways is not just the recital clause, so to speak, that is cited in the beginning, then becomes irrelevant at the moment we move on to practical issues. It is just the other way around. The threefold revelation of God is the basis of all of our practical tools in Natural Church Development. How do we deal with conflicts? How can we grow in love? How can we improve the team dynamics in our leadership? How can we better

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relate to the needs of people outside of the church? How can our small groups become relevant and inspiring?

These and hundreds of similar questions are addressed in NCD, and every single one is approached on the basis of this criterion: How can we best relate the core of God's three revelations to that specific topic? An overly creative and stimulating criterion! And surprisingly or not, it is remarkably more effective than many secular management gimmicks that have been developed in a non-Christian background, reflecting non-biblical anthropologies and being based on the assumption that it doesn't make any major difference whether or not we believe in a living God.

JACL: In your writings, you are offering not only universal principles of spiritual health, you are also providing some practical tools (such as the Trinitarian Compass). Can you tell us more about this tool and its practical use?

Schwarz: It is difficult if not impossible to communicate the dynamics related to a Trinitarian understanding of God in mere words. What we call the Trinitarian Compass is a graphical representation of these dynamics, related to specific topics at stake. Many people may have a hard time reading and understanding the 15 books of Augustine's work on the Trinity—regretfully, I would like to add, because it is such a rich teaching. But almost everyone can relate to the Trinitarian Compass, immediately and without years of study. A weekend's introduction can lay such a solid foundation that years if not decades of our lives will be shaped by that experience, and they will be shaped in a highly fruitful way.

Some people are puzzled why many of my books have almost identical titles: *The 3 Colors of Leadership*, *The 3 Colors of Spirituality*, *The 3 Colors of Love*, and so on. However, these titles reveal the approach that each of these books follows. I am not writing about my own favorite ideas or the things that happened to become important to me in my personal pilgrimage. Rather, each of these books starts with a presentation of the Trinitarian Compass, related to the topic at stake. We have opted to use the language of the colors of light to communicate this truth: In order to produce pure white light, the colors green, red, and blue must be displayed simultaneously. The absence of all colors results in darkness; the full presence of all colors is the presence of God. The absence of one or two of the colors leads to a blurred view of reality, an indication of a decay in spiritual health.

JACL: Why is the reality of a Trinitarian understanding of God so important for leaders?

The most important thing that distinguishes leaders from non-leaders is that leaders are responsible for other people.

Schwarz: The most important thing that distinguishes leaders from non-leaders is that leaders are responsible for other people. Leaders cannot afford to limit their focus to themselves and their own favorite theologies shaped by their biographies, including both highly personal traumata and eureka experiences. They must be able to serve people according to the spiritual needs of these people, which should not be confused with the spiritual needs that the leader may have himself or herself. People without leadership responsibility are free to simply project their own spiritual experiences on others; for a leader, this would be highly immature, even irresponsible.

If we approach the triune God as we try to do through the Trinitarian Compass, we have a way of assessing the spiritual needs of the people we are responsible for, and to address these needs in a fruitful way. We also have a way of monitoring the progress that people make in their endeavor to radiate increasingly all the colors of light through their own lives. And the same dynamics that apply to the lives of other people apply to the lives of the leaders themselves. The Trinitarian Compass helps them to radiate God's power, wisdom, and love, better than before.

JACL: What are the key values of Trinitarian leadership?

Schwarz: Appreciation of diversity, appreciation of unity, and appreciation of balance. Diversity is good, but not all forms of diversity are fruitful. Unity is essential, but not all procedures to get united are constructive. Balance is absolutely biblical, but not all approaches featuring that term are based on Scripture. Trinitarian leadership helps us to contribute to health based on biblical standards. This includes addressing defects, errors, and heresies as well. Do you know what a heresy is? Many people would answer that it is the opposite of the truth, but things are usually a bit more complicated. Just look into Church history. Most of the major heresies were not simply the opposite of the truth, but something far more delicate—they were the representation of a partial truth. Most heresies have not been anti-biblical, but were based on some biblical insights that were placed at the center, while other—usually complementary—biblical insights were ignored, if not suppressed. Trinitarian leadership enables us to recognize this trap and, what is more, provides us with mechanisms to address it.

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JACL: If you were to summarize the essence or legacy of Trinitarian leadership, what would you say?

Schwarz: It is no more nor less than representing God by modeling Christ to the people under our leadership. And even more, empowering people under our leadership to represent Christ themselves. Strictly speaking, they don't follow us—by imitating our strengths and replicating our mistakes—they follow Christ. They increasingly reflect all the colors of God's light.

You know that in Natural Church Development we speak about the “all by itself” principle, which is the very heart of NCD strategy: Rather than trying to pursue church growth in our own human strength, we focus on reducing human-made obstacles that hinder God from doing what He has promised to do. If we wanted to use precise theological language, we shouldn't actually speak about “all by itself” growth, but about “all by Himself” or “all by God-self” growth. This God has revealed Himself to us in a threefold way. If we get connected to Him in each of the areas addressed by His threefold revelation, we will experience God Himself working in us. What else should be the chief task of a Christian leader, if not that?