



God – Three in One

John 16:6-15

TRINITY PULPIT

Several years ago, an interesting book titled *The Shack* became a bestseller. The story was compelling, but one aspect of that book sparked discussion and disagreement among Christians. William Paul Young represented the Trinity in a very unique way.

For God the Father, Young portrayed God as a large black woman, who was outgoing, warm-hearted, and kind. For God the Holy Spirit, Young's persona was that of an Asian woman dressed in bright colors who seemed to dart in and out of sight in a Tinkerbell-like fashion. For Jesus, the author pretty much stayed with the stereotype of Jesus as a workman, complete with jeans, flannel shirt, and tool belt. Each of these personas of God exhibited unique characteristics, and each had a specific role to play in the fictional story.

Many of us have read this book and many of us have seen the movie but, as creative as that portrayal was, Young's attempt to give the Trinity personality fell short of capturing the theology fully. However, Young is not the first to fall short when it comes to understanding the Trinity. The reality is the Trinity is a mystery to us. We have a hard time in understanding what we mean when we say God is one and yet three. God is three in one and one in three.

This idea of the Triune God, the Trinity, is a difficult idea to grasp. And it has been difficult for Christians from the early church down to the present. Some attempts have failed miserably to capture the three-in-oneness of God completely. These imperfect attempts to define the Trinity became early Christian heresies. A heresy is a doctrine or teaching that is incompatible with the Church's view of Scripture and the traditional understanding of those who have gone before us.

The two primary heresies about the Trinity, although there are more than two, are modalism and subordinations. First modalism: there were those who said that God was One

God who just appeared in three different roles — or modalities — as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A good illustration of this is one I have heard used to describe the Trinity, but unfortunately it falls short.

The idea here is that God is just one playing different parts. It is like saying that I, as Jeff Roberts, am a husband, father, and a pastor. I am the same person but you know me in a different mode or part. That is a heresy in understanding God as Trinity.

The other heresy is that God the Father is the supreme figure, while both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to him in some way. This heresy suggests that Jesus and the Holy Spirit is not fully God as is God the Father. This is also a heresy.

All kinds of smart people have developed analogies to try to explain how God can be three-in-one:

- God is like the spring that flows into the stream that flows in the lake (according to the church father Anselm).
- God is like a plant, with the Father as the deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks into the earth, and the Spirit who flowers forth to spread beauty and fragrance (according to the church father Tertullian).
- That God is a Trinity of love means that God is the lover, the beloved and love itself all at the same time (according to St. Augustine).
- The Trinity is like three torches in which the light of the first passes to the second and then is relayed to the third until they are all burning in one blaze of holy fire.

Yet all these pictures break down. That's why Christian thinkers have always said that if we tried to grasp the Trinity we would be "frenzy-stricken for prying into the mystery of God" (Gregory the Theologian). This is beyond rational thinking, but that doesn't mean it's ir

rational. We can't fully understand the concept of the Trinity, but that doesn't make it nonsensical.

So, when we speak of the Trinity, we speak of something that is a mystery yet at deep truth about God. Although the term is not mentioned in the Bible, the doctrine is found throughout the scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament. When we say God is three in one and one in three what we are saying is this:

The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three in person. These definitions express three crucial truths: (1) the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, (2) each Person is fully God, (3) there is only one God.

This is as much a confession of faith and confession of the Biblical witness as much as it is something that we fully understand. It is as Jesus said: we know the wind blows because we see its effect and we feel it but we do not see it. We don't know where it is going next. We don't have to fully comprehend something for us to know it is true and live according to the fact it is true. That is true about the Trinity.

I want to answer two questions for us today in regards to the Trinity. I want us to think about why it is important to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity and I want us to consider what difference in our lives does the Trinity make.

First, why is it important for us to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity? First, I would say that it is important to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, because it identifies the God of the Bible.

Here in our passage in John 16, Jesus speaks of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus would say I and the Father are one. Jesus would say that the counselor or the Holy Spirit will come and will remind us what Jesus has taught. The Holy Spirit will not speak on his own behalf but on behalf of the Father and the Son. Just as Jesus spoke and acted on the Father's behalf, so the Holy Spirit now works and moves on behalf of the Father and Son. The point here is simply that when we speak of the Trinity we are identifying the God of which we speak.

If you were to go and ask people if they believe in God, nearly 90% of Americans would say yes. Yes they believe in God. We must not measure the lack of identi-

fication with religion or religious organizations as a sign that people don't have some type of belief in God. For all of the struggle of religion in America today, belief in God remains high. However, when you begin to dig a little deeper what someone means by God has various meanings.

Of course when our Muslim friends speak of Allah we might want to say we are speaking of the same God.

However, how Allah is defined by character and how the God of the Bible defined by Jesus is characterized, we discover we are not speaking of the same God in relation to character.

We might say that the God of Judaism, Yahweh God, is the same God. Of course that is true. But when we speak of God fully revealed in Jesus, then we are speaking of a different and more particular revelation of Yahweh God.

When others speak of God, they might be speaking of a God that they have kind of created in their own mind or understanding. They may be as many of our founding fathers were — Unitarians and Universalists. There were many who were followers of Jesus but many were of the mindset that God had simply created the world and put it into motion. In addition, Unitarians reject the Trinity. They view Jesus as moral but not a deity.

When someone speaks of God or a Great Spirit or some other force in the universe, they may be referring to the God of the Bible, but that is a very elementary understanding of God. It might be a starting place, but it does not always describe God as we speak of God revealed fully in the person of Jesus.

So, the Trinity is important because when we speak of God, we know we are speaking of God whose character of love, grace, righteousness, concern, and priorities are defined by Jesus and are being perfected by the Holy Spirit.

A second reason to affirm the Trinity is that it is what the Bible teaches. Although the Bible does not mention the Trinity, we find Trinitarian passages through scripture. The one we read today is just one of many.

When God creates the world, the Son and the Spirit are also intimately involved in creation. When Jesus redeems the world and saves us from sin, he is resurrected by the Father, and we are born anew through the Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit helps us grow spiritually, it is the very work of the Spirit of Jesus by the Father who sustains us. When we come to faith in Christ, we experi

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ence the triune God coming to us: a loving Father who embraces us, a Savior Son who died for us, and the Holy Spirit working in us to help us grow and mature in our faith.

So we affirm the Trinity because this doctrine is found throughout the Scripture. In Genesis we find the plural, let us make man — humanity — in our likeness. In Revelation we find the picture of the Triune God. So, the cry of praise goes up Holy Holy Holy.

We affirm the Trinity because it identifies God, it is Biblical, and it is the understanding of Jesus. At the end of our questions comes, what did Jesus believe and how did Jesus live in relation to God? Jesus lived with the understanding that he had come from the Father. He lived with the understanding that he and the Father were one. He lived with the understanding that what he revealed had been revealed to him by the Father. Jesus lived with the understanding that the Holy Spirit would come and continue his mission through those who would follow him. Jesus commands us to go and make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus lives with an affirmation of the Trinity. Thus, as followers of Jesus, we, too, live with this affirmation.

So we affirm the Doctrine of the Trinity because it identifies the person of God. It is the Biblical affirmation and it the understanding of the one we call Lord — Jesus.

The second question for us today is, what difference does it make in our living to affirm the Trinity? Let me mention three thoughts.

First, when we affirm the Trinity, we understand the nature of God. I have said that through the Trinity we identify the person or character of God. This doctrine helps us to understand who God is and how God works. I would think of God in this way.

God the Father — God the Father reminds us of God's power and compassion. God the Father is seen as the one who is all-powerful. This is the God who speaks creation into order, brings judgment, and is so mysterious that those in the Old Testament are fearful to mention his very name. Yet, Jesus tells us this same one is Father. This same God who is all-powerful is full of mercy and grace. God the Father reminds us of the greatness and power of God but also of God's mercy and grace.

God the Son — Identification with us. Jesus became fully human and yet remained fully God. Jesus came so

we might know God. Jesus came to show us the fullness of the Father. Jesus is how we identify with God.

You remember the cute little story of the little girl who was scared from a thunderstorm. When her mother went into the room to comfort her she said, "You know God is always with you. You are never alone. God is with you." The little girl said, "Yes, I know it, but sometimes I need someone with skin on." Yes, we all do. Jesus is the eternal word of God. John declares the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our high priest with whom we can identify and through whom God sympathizes. In Jesus, God experiences all of the heights and depths of being human. Jesus helps us identify. God is not a God far away but has come to us.

God the Spirit — God the Spirit reminds us of presence. Jesus promised us that the counselor would come. The *Paraclete* is the term. It is a legal term meaning an assistant; one to stand next to you in court; one who comes to your aid. When we think of the Holy Spirit, we think of the one who is with us. The Holy Spirit guides us and is in constant work making us like Jesus.

This is important because one without the other can skew our experience with God. If we only have God the father we many times lack understanding of God's character and presence. If we only have Jesus we can lack understanding of the power of God. If we only have the Spirit we can forget the very concrete ways Jesus showed us and taught us to act. You see, each compliments the other and completes our experience with God.

We need the Trinity because it helps us in prayer. When we pray and we understand the Trinity, we understand that our prayer deepens. We are coming before Almighty God but we are coming by the relationship with have in God through what God has done in Jesus. We are coming in prayer, and we know that even as we pray, Jesus makes intercession for us, and so does the Spirit. We pray with a confidence that the Triune God is not simply hearing our prayers, but participating in our prayers to make our prayers into accordance to God's will, and thus our thoughts and actions into accordance with God's will.

Finally, to affirm the Trinity reminds us of the joy of community. The Trinity is a beautiful picture of a loving, giving, and joyful community. God the Father, Son and Spirit delight in each other.

We affirm the Trinity because it identifies God, it is Biblical, and it is the understanding of Jesus.

In *Unparalleled: How Christianity's Uniqueness Makes it Compelling*, Jared Wilson writes:

The Beatles said all you need is love," Larry Norman sang. "Then they broke up."

Love is the thing we all know we need. And yet love is the thing we struggle so much to get right. We think of it largely in terms of feelings, of "being in love" or "falling in love," but feelings are fleeting. That kind of love certainly can't be all we need; it's so hard to maintain! I remember some of the best love advice I ever got. It was right before my wedding, and my dad had taken me aside to encourage and pray for me. I jokingly said, "What if I fall out of love?" He returned my sarcasm, "Then you fall right back in!" My dad was really making the point that real love is not something you fall in and out of. It's intentional. It has movement. He goes on to point out that God is love not that just God is loving. If God is not triune then God cannot be love. God could be loving but not be love. Only in community of three, God as Trinity, can God be love. If love is the basic character of God then God must be in community.

Then he writes:

This is the hope of all mankind—that the "fusty doctrine" of the Trinity would "come to life" by swallowing us up into the love God has enjoyed since before time began. C. S. Lewis, himself once an atheist, was right: "The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life."

The thing that matters most is that you and I have been invited into this holy community we call the Trinity. In this community there is joy and delight.

Just as God is in community, the Trinity calls us into community with God and each other. The kind of community where there are distinct persons and yet we are one in purpose. The kind of community where self sacrifice is the primary motivator. The kind of community where we delight not in that we are the same but that we are distinct. The kind of community where it matters not who gets the glory. The kind of community that the Trinity reveals.

Our God is triune in nature. We affirm it because it identifies our God. We affirm it because it is Biblical and the teaching of Jesus. We embrace it because it helps us experience God. It helps us pray. It invites us into a holy community.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin
Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and
the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of
life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

Amen. ▲



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