

The Trinity: Explain That Again Please

Trinity Sunday

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 Matthew 28:16-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday we entered into a new liturgical church season. The Day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the longest of our church seasons, which will last all the way until the season of Advent, near December.

The primary focus of the season of Pentecost is on the life of the church, the body of Christ. So in the next several months we will primarily be addressing issues such as our life together in community, our growth in faithfulness and discipleship, and how that is reflected in our service to the local community and beyond.

Today, the Sunday after the Day of Pentecost, is always designated as Trinity Sunday on the liturgical church calendar. So we will spend some time this morning focusing on the triune nature of God: God as three-in-one and one-in-three. In all actuality, however, Trinity Sunday is a time when many pulpits across the nation will become arenas where good and learned preachers will struggle to explain the unexplainable God. And in most cases the unexplainable God will triumph – basically remaining unexplainable.

Admittedly, the concept of the Trinity - God in three persons - is a difficult doctrine to wrap one's mind around. Throughout the centuries, in fact, it has been almost as much of an obstacle and stumbling block as it has been an aid to faith. To many, it flies in the face of not only logic but of our Hebraic inheritance that valued, above all, the fundamental singularity of God. That is most profoundly recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, that states, "**The Lord our God is one God.**" We believe that as well, but add that **this one God is revealed to us, or related to us, in three distinct ways.**

But in spite of the confusion and divisiveness that this doctrine has caused, and continues to cause, the Christian church considers it to be an essential part of the faith that underlies Christianity. You may find it interesting to know, however, that even though the Scriptures do refer to God in three different ways: as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Holy Spirit/Sustainer, **neither a theological explanation nor the words "Trinity" or "triune" are even found in the Bible.**

That didn't come until the Fourth Century at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 C.E. **The Nicene Creed** was put into writing only after hundreds of years of arguments and intense struggle within the early church. That struggle dealt with how to put into words their understanding who God was, and even more so who Jesus was (and therefore by extension, who Jesus was not).

Once the majority settled on specific language, thus becoming orthodoxy and official church teaching, then many others (those in the minority, mostly called gnostics) were not only ostracized, they were condemned for heresy, some even put to death of this issue. (The Church has always had problems with those that don't tote the party line.) Many persons within the church today, however, would undoubtedly be considered heretics as well if forced to fully accept the language of this ancient doctrine. So I would like for us now to recite this ancient Nicene Creed, that can be found on page 15 of the Hymnal. [Read the Nicene Creed in unison].

Even though it is true that “three persons in one Godhead” is a mystery no one can fully understand, this mystery is far too central to the Christian faith to be either blindly accepted because we are supposed to accept it, or casually shrugged off because no one can either explain it well enough or put it into language that we all like.

Feminist theologian and scholar Barbara Brown Zikmund, while dean of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, wrote an article that appeared in *The Christian Century* magazine back in 1987. She wrote:

In recent years I have reclaimed a very old and very important Christian way of speaking about God: the doctrine of the Trinity. I am now convinced that trinitarian theology captures some of the unique message of the gospel and expresses certain understandings of God consistent with women's experience.

On one level the trinitarian formula as God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is totally unacceptable -- an old man, a young man, and a dove. The words are redolent of hierarchy and patriarchy. The masculine bias of trinitarian dogma seems overwhelming.

Furthermore, trinitarian theology is hierarchical (the Son proceeds from the Father, etc.). Implying that all of creation is ordered from the top down, such theology can justify oppressive political and social systems.

At first glance it is hard to imagine how any modern feminist committed to the liberation of the community of women and men in the church can find trinitarian theology helpful. But [she continues] let us examine it more closely.

That's a very good suggestion! While the mystery of God revealed in three ways is a core belief of Christianity (it is one of Christianity's major contributions to world religion) most people struggle to explain it.

So it seems to me that instead of trying so hard to explain how these three things are really one thing, or how this one thing is really three things, why don't we instead must try to do what the doctrine of the Trinity was originally formulated to do: **give words to our faith.**

The early Christians, living in a hostile and threatening world, felt they needed to put some definitive language to what they believed Jesus Christ had revealed to them. They believed that for the sake of unity they needed a common language, a common confession in order to express their unique identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

In our hostile and pluralistic world of today, many are rightly seeking to once again put words to our faith, yet words that express a 21st century understanding of God. What we're learning, however, is that **spouting dogma and 'definitive' language doesn't do anyone much good in our day and age. It works, in fact, contrary to unity.**

What we need to explain, then, are not so much the unexplainable mysteries of God, but rather, in language that is both articulate and faithful, we need to explain what God *has* done among us, what God *is doing* now, and what God promises *will be* accomplished. In other words, God calls us to be witnesses to our faith and the good news of God's redeeming love and grace.

What many theologians who value trinitarian theology insist is most important about belief in a triune God is not that we see God in three ways, per se, but that we understand God as a dynamic community. Barbara Brown Zikmund poetically phrases it this way, "When we worship a triune God we celebrate the love which flows in God's eternal dance of togetherness, and which we know through Jesus Christ as Lord of the dance."

Affirming the importance of relationship in human life, then, is a reflection of what it means to be created in God's image. **Trinitarian theology asserts that relationship is fundamental to the nature and character of God** (as in the *relationship* between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and that community is the foundation of God's interaction with the world.

It comes down to this: **God is community; God creates community.** When we live in true community we reflect the triune nature of God, who has established a covenant relationship with us. Some folks are now fond of stating all this as the **Tri-unity of God.**

So when you think upon what it means to believe in a triune God - God revealed in three distinct ways - try to understand God as *community* and *relationship*. Then let your life exhibit an ethic that measures strength not in terms of power and control over others, but rather in terms of living in respectful, mutually affirming, and right relationships with others.

Our experiences of God, then, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, invite us all to take the doctrine of the Trinity a bit more seriously.

Amen.

Resources:

"So Explain It To Me" by Mary W. Anderson. This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, May 20-27, 1999, p. 523. Anderson is pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Evanston, IL.

"Trinity and Women's Experience" by Barbara Brown Zikmund. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, April 15, 1987, pp. 354-356. Zikmund is dean of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA.

"Christian Doctrine" Revised Edition, by Shirley C. Guthrie. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.