

The Trinity: Why I'm Not a Unitarian

Trinity Sunday

John 3:1-17 Romans 8:12-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I know that some of you are thinking to yourself this morning, [with excitement] "Oh Great. We're going to hear a sermon on the Doctrine of the Trinity!" And I know that others of you, probably the majority, are thinking, [with disdain] "Oh Great. We're going to hear a sermon on the Doctrine of the Trinity!" To which I offer the dual response, "You sure are!" and, "I'm afraid so."

On the liturgical church calendar, the first Sunday after Pentecost is always designated as Trinity Sunday. 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, and especially since the Enlightenment, it has been almost as much of an obstacle and stumbling block to faith as it has been an aid to faith development.

For instance, to many, it flies in the face of our own Hebraic inheritance that valued, above all, the fundamental singularity of God, as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, "The Lord our God is one God." Yet, in spite of the confusion and divisiveness that this doctrine has caused, and continues to cause, the church considers the three-in-one nature of God to be an essential part of the Christian tradition.

Our theological faith tradition claims that this one God is revealed to us, or relates to us, in three distinct ways: as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Holy Spirit/Sustainer. But let's face it, this ancient doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in language that is considered by many, many good and faithful Christians in our day and time as either somewhat meaningless, or at least misleading.

One particular stumbling block to many in our post-modern world is the age-old picture of God as an old man, a young guy, and a bird. Just look at how artists throughout the ages have painted their conception of Trinity, including the 1620s painting from the Flemish artist, Hendrick van Balen, that I put on the cover of today's bulletin. You can see how this particular visual portrayal of God has been the almost singularly guiding image for the past 2000 years.

I am among those progressive Christians that think this ancient language and way of visualizing God must be reinterpreted if the doctrine is to be the powerful expression of faith for us as it has been for Christians in the past. But I will add this: Trinity Sunday also serves as a reminder that there is always more to

God than our own theological understanding. There is more to God than anyone can ever grasp. That's one of the things that progressive Christian theologians are teaching us, that **calling oneself a Christian is not dependent upon a holding to a literalized, dogmatic understanding of traditional church doctrine, including the nature of God as revealed in the ancient language of the Trinity.**

This brings me to the primary point I want to make today. And to do this I will be sharing extensively from an article posted on the Internet only 6 weeks ago by former Episcopal Bishop, **John Shelby Spong**. Entitled “**Why I Am Not a Unitarian**” Spong puts into words what I, and a *lot* of other progressive Christians, have been struggling with for quite some time now.

I want to share this with you today because I know several of you have explored and ventured into the Unitarian church, or perhaps consider yourself as leaning more toward unitarianism than trinitarianism.

Some years ago, Spong was delivering a series of lectures in St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Morristown, New Jersey. A woman in the audience asked him a pointed and provocative question: “**How is what you say about Jesus different from what the Unitarians say?**”

Spong goes on to state that this woman had no intention of being anything other than an active member of the Episcopal Church, yet, when she articulated her understanding of Jesus, she tended to do so in relatively modern, non-traditional terms that she could embrace.

For this woman, and perhaps for yourself, Jesus was a good man, an outstanding teacher, a God-like example and even a human icon of God. Nothing else made much sense to her. The Unitarian Church had no special appeal for her, yet deep in her heart **she knew that her view of Jesus was more in line with what she had heard the Unitarian tradition espouse than it was reflective of classical Christianity.** During Spong's lectures, she believed she heard him defining Jesus in similar, human-sounding categories. It was for her, she said later, a freeing experience.

Spong, as those of you know who are familiar with his work, does a thoroughly scholarly job of tracing the history of Christian theology and doctrine, especially in how it connects to ancient Jewish forms of thought and imagery. In those particular lectures, **his audience began to see how the early supernatural interpretations, so prevalent in first century Judaism, began to fasten themselves onto the life of Jesus of Nazareth.** This was the context, Spong writes, in which the question about a Unitarian understanding of Jesus was asked.

And now I would like to share John Shelby Spong's response of why he isn't a Unitarian, and why he can still claim Jesus as Lord. Perhaps this will help many of you, as it has me, in your reflections upon your own personal journey of faith as well. [Bold emphasis, mine.]

I was startled to hear myself saying in response to her question words that sounded harsh, even judgmental – “**Oh, I could never be**

a Unitarian!" – because I meant no disrespect for that religious tradition, which I greatly admire. The Unitarian Fellowship has put the more traditional forms of Christianity to shame with its consistent social witness for justice for all of God's people. Unitarians have championed the causes of racial and gender equality. They advocated for and protected gay and lesbian groups long before other Christian bodies were willing to do so. They have maintained intellectual credibility by their ability to be open to evolving religious truth.

Unitarianism actually came into existence as a response to the explosion of knowledge growing out of the enlightenment, while mainline Christian bodies could do no better than fight a slow and costly rear-guard retreat in the vain defense of a biblical or creedal literalism. With a full knowledge of and a deep appreciation for these aspects of Unitarianism, what was there in me that caused me to maintain so quickly, and even a bit adamantly, that I could never be a Unitarian? If that were not negative then I clearly needed to put some content into that statement because it sounded negative. Allow me now to do so.

I see myself as a part of a long historical tradition from which I do not seek release. That tradition means that I must walk in the company of Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, Irenaeus, Origin, Augustine, Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Whitehead, Tillich, Kung, Ruether, Fiorenza, John Robinson and James Pike, just to name a few of those who have built that tradition. Those heroic, spiritual ancestors of mine created tension within Christianity and wrestled openly with its substance. Their goal was to enable their faith tradition and their Christ to be heard through the ages in new accents and in contemporary thought forms. These leaders lived in that stretching between a particular pathway of faith received in a particular historical context and the ever-changing understanding of that faith that was required as the years and the centuries rolled by and as the human context changed dramatically. **The temptation in all religion is to freeze the faith story in some literal and time-bound form and then to make ultimate claims for that interpretation.**

Unitarians bear witness to today, and when the frozen religious literalism of the past becomes intolerable they feel free to walk away from it. When they find that they can no longer translate with meaning such traditional doctrines as the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Trinity they feel free to abandon them. In particular the Unitarian tradition found the unity of God

compromised by the rigid attempt to define God as Trinity. They were told that these issues were settled and that there was no further room for debate. Unable to worship God with their minds, they decided to leave. That was a valid choice, but it is not my choice. **I, like them, do not want to be part of a Christianity that fails to make room for those who need to probe intellectually and spiritually the creedal formulas of yesterday, but by rejecting the literalized concepts of the previous generation they also seemed to me to reject the experience that compelled those people to articulate their religious words in the first place.** That meant that the tension of theological debate disappears and almost inevitably they become wedded to their own time in history. When one marries the present one quickly becomes widowed.

Every Christian generation must sing the Lord's song in the accents of its day and inside the bounds of knowledge available in its generation. For that song to have depth and intensity, however, it must be sung in tension and harmony, not with the words of the past, but with the experience of the past. **I feel no great need to preserve the words of my religious past, but I never want to reject the experience of the past that caused the words of my faith story to come into being.**

As a Christian I seek to separate the experience of God, which I regard as eternal, from the traditional words used to explain that experience, which I always regard as time bound and transitory. When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words. I must, as Solomon did when he built the Temple, take the treasures of the past into the new temple with me. I refuse to turn away either from the hard questions of my day or to ignore the classical Christian symbols of the past. I will wrestle with the scriptures, but I will never abandon the scriptures. I will seek to break open the creeds, but I will never reject the creeds. I will fight with doctrines like Incarnation and the Trinity, but I will never dismiss the truth that people were pointing to when these doctrines were first formed. It would, therefore, be too easy for me to be a Unitarian. The grist for my mill would be removed. It is by living in the tension between the past and the future that my Christian life is formed. I could not abandon that struggle. I walk a fine theological line. I see it as necessary to enable me to "sing the Lord's song in the strange land" of the 21st century. I can appreciate my Unitarian friends who do not want to be bothered by ideas that make little sense today, but I could not be me if I were not caught between the experience of the past and the articulation of that experience in the words and concepts of

today. I hope this makes sense. Unitarians are almost always my allies in the theological struggles of my generation, but my vocation makes me go in another direction.

– John Shelby Spong

To underscore all of this, on this Trinity Sunday, let me close with what amounts as a creed or confession of faith that Spong expressed in the Epilogue of his 1998 book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. It expresses quite well why many of us who are on the progressive side of the Christian theological spectrum choose to stay actively involved, like Spong, in the mainline Christian movement.

I believe that there is a transcending reality present in the very heart of life. I name that reality God. I believe that this reality has a bias toward life and wholeness and that its presence is experienced as that which calls us beyond all of our fearful and fragile human limits.

I believe in Jesus, called Messiah, or Christ. I believe that in his life this transcendent reality has been revealed so completely that it caused people to refer to him as God's son, even God's *only* son. The burning God intensity was so real in him that I look at his life and say, "In you I see the meaning of God, so for me you are both Lord and Christ."

I believe that Jesus was a God presence, a powerful experience of the reality of that Ground of Being undergirding us all at the very depths of life.

I believe in that gift of the Spirit who was called "the giver of life." Once we located God only externally and called this God the Father Almighty. Next, we located this God in Jesus, and we called him the Son Incarnate. Now we locate God in every person, and we call this God the Holy Spirit.

I believe that this Spirit inevitably created a community of faith that will come, in time, to open this world to God as the very Ground of its life and being.

So in your efforts to try to understand the meaning of the Trinity, whether it's new and evolving language like Spong's, or the traditional language of the Apostle's Creed, or something in between, know that College Hill is a spiritual family of faith where you are welcomed, where you can be respected, and where you can belong.

Amen.