

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015

The Doctrine of the Trinity

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Romans 8:12-17 John 3:1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day when we bring particular attention to the triune God whom we worship. But who or what is the triune God? The answer to this question is one that often befuddles Christians in general and Presbyterians in particular.

Our two scripture readings this morning both allude to the Trinity. The reading from Romans says, in part, "... we cry 'Abba, Father.' *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs --- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.*" The Spirit, God, Christ --- all three are mentioned but are they one and the same or are they three? That is the question.

The reading from John similarly refers to the three: "*Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of the water and the Spirit.*" Jesus is speaking and talks about God and the Spirit. Again all three parts of the Trinity are mentioned but are they one and the same or are they three? The question remains unanswered.

As Yul Brynner famously said in the movie "The King and I", "*It's a puzzlement.*" -- and indeed it is.

In his book Always Being Reformed¹, Shirley Guthrie says, "*Reformed Christians have always answered this question by confessing their faith in one triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*"

If you recall, I have told you a number of times that my favorite scripture passage is John 1:1, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" The Word in this case is Christ --- Christ was God --- here two parts of the Trinity are clearly linked as being one and the same. Matthew 28:18-20 ties the three together as one, "*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded to you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

Christ said that the Holy Spirit will be with us always and here he says that he will be with us *“to the very end of the age.”* One plus one equals one in my mind.

Some years ago I was teaching a class in Saudi Arabia and got into a discussion of Christianity and Islam with my Muslim host. I said to him that both faiths worship one God, the God of Abraham, Jehovah, Yahweh, Allah --- whatever people call him. My host responded that I was wrong, that Christians worship three gods --- Jehovah, Jesus and an unnamed god which Christians call the Holy Spirit. I tried fruitlessly to explain the Trinitarian God to him but he couldn't grasp the concept at all, so much so that he gave me a Quran and several Islamic tracts to show his point of view. I can understand his confusion and why any Muslim would be confused by the concept --- certainly many Christians are also confused.

It is rather easy for us to accept that Jesus is the Son of God but how can the Son also be the Father?

Shirley Guthrie goes on to say, *“The oneness of God is not the oneness of a self-contained individual, it is the unity of a community of persons ... They are not three independent persons who get together to form a club ... They are what they are only in relationship with one another. Each exists only in their relationship and would not exist apart from it. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live only in and with one another, eternally united in mutual love and shared purpose. ... It is no longer possible to consider thinking of God, the Father first of all as a solitary number one, ‘top’ God, with a begotten Son and proceeding Spirit who are somehow inferior to ‘him.’ ...*

“If the deity of God is fulfilled in the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the true humanity of human beings created in God’s image is realized only in human community, not in the lonely self-assertion of individuals who seek to be themselves apart from or in competition with other human beings.”

If the concept is hard to grasp for adults, consider explaining it to children. How can three apparently different things be the same thing?

One classic way of explaining it is to use water as an example. Children are shown ice cubes, a glass of water, and a tea kettle of hot steaming water. Ice is one form of water as is the liquid in the glass as is the steam coming from the kettle, three apparently different things which are really one and the same. The analogy is that God

is represented by the ice cubes, the solid basis of our faith; Jesus is represented by the glass of water, the living water of scripture; and the Holy Spirit is the steam spreading out and touching all of us.

Here in the South, people love sweet tea. The next time you make it, think about the Trinity. You boil water until it becomes steaming; then you pour it over tea bags and sugar; and then you add ice --- a trinity of water --- steam, liquid, and solid. It's all water --- one and the same thing.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are also one and the same but in a much more profound way.

With the Trinity, *"The Father is the Creator, Ruler, Protector and Preserver of the world and all living things in it. The Son is the Judge, Reconciler, and Savior of sinful, needy human beings. The Holy Spirit is God at work in the world to renew and transform the hearts, minds, wills and bodies of individual human beings, and to create new human community where people have been alienated from God and one another. Three 'Persons' --- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three works --- creation-preservation, reconciliation-salvation, renewal-transformation."* (Guthrie).

Shirley Guthrie points out that there are not three different Gods, or one God who does three different things. Rather scripture tells us that there is only one God who is involved in everything. John 1:3 says, *"Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made"* referring to Jesus, the Word, being God. Then we can look at Genesis 1:2, *"... the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."* Creation is explained as being the work of the wind or the Spirit of God which transforms chaos into order.

Guthrie said that, *"We may associate different works with one or another of the three persons, but we cannot separate them. What one wills and does, the other two do also. Where one is at work, there the other two are also at work. The purpose and goal of any one are the same as the purpose and goal of the other two. For God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one triune God, and therefore also the works of the Trinity are indivisible."*

When we ordain pastors, elders and deacons in the Presbyterian church, they are asked; *"Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and*

Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?"

I have heard that question asked hundreds of times. I have never heard anyone respond, "No."

Trinitarian thinking is fundamental to being a Presbyterian and to all reformed traditions.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the 2011 New International Version of the Bible

1. Shirley C. Guthrie, Always Being Reformed, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1996