

Sermon 6-16-19  
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The Holy Trinity

### **Bible-believing, Evangelical, Catholic**

The Church has an ancient doctrine known as the Holy Trinity. Today is the appointed festival to celebrate that doctrine – Holy Trinity Sunday. It's the only festival in the church year dedicated to a doctrine and not a person or event. So, the purpose of Holy Trinity Sunday is to speak of God and what we can know about Him.

The famous late 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, concluded that human beings can know nothing about God. Kant was a Lutheran, by the way, so he knew about the bible. And he should have known better. But because Western philosophy had been overtaken by rationalism, he attempted to make statements about God through philosophy rather than revelation. Therefore, from philosophy he came to the conclusion that we can know nothing about God.

Now, one of our contemporary philosophers, Norman Geisler, noticed that Kant made a very simple but fatal error in his conclusion. If we can't know anything about God, that means we actually can know something about God – namely that we can't know anything about God. And that error blows Kant's incredible philosophical labors to smithereens.

So, human beings can know something about God. And the best way to know anything about anyone is to let them tell you about themselves.

According to the biblical record, the Creator of this creation has been speaking to us from the beginning. In particular He spoke with Moses, the Prophets and the authors of the New Testament over an approximately 1,500 year period of earth's ancient history. We call the collection of books they wrote the bible.

Martin Luther was not the first to translate the ancient text of the bible into a modern language, German, but his effort spurred its subsequent translation into a myriad of earth's modern languages. The invention of the printing press greatly aided in the distribution of these translations. And so we can understand God's ancient revelation to us in today's language.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was derived over the centuries from numerous theological studies of the bible verses in which Yahweh reveals His true nature to us. The study resulted in the creation of three historic creeds, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The characteristic of all three creeds is that they are short forms of what God has actually revealed about Himself in the pages of the bible.

For your information, the Athanasian is a long creed and it's not used in any of our regular services. It fully documents God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But it especially deals with the question of Jesus – how can a human being be both fully human and yet fully God.

Now, the shocking thing Yahweh reveals about Himself in the bible is that He's a Trinitarian being. But Yahweh does not directly reveal His Trinitarian existence in any one place in Scripture. Rather, our understanding of Yahweh as a Trinitarian being must be assembled by collecting and comparing the statements Yahweh makes about Himself, particularly the statements made by Jesus of Nazareth. So, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is something humans have created. Nevertheless, it's an accurate depiction of Yahweh because it's drawn from God's revelation about Himself. It's drawn from the pages of the bible.

Nevertheless, there has been much consternation concerning this doctrine over the centuries. To this day Jews and Muslims utterly reject the doctrine of the Holy Trinity primarily because they reject Jesus as the Son of God.

Unitarians and some believers in Jesus reject the doctrine for another reason. It seems to defy human reason and human experience. Indeed, many Christians today seem to have this problem with the doctrine. It just doesn't seem reasonable. It doesn't even seem comprehensible. Our shared human experience as Unitarian beings makes it difficult to understand and receive Yahweh as a Trinitarian being.

Here's the problem. When Yahweh created the heavens and the earth, He created every creature, whether human, animal or insect, as an individual – as one person in one being. Inside me and inside you there's one person. Or there ought to be only one person. Indeed, we consider it a psychological disorder when multiple personalities emerge from the same human being. Tragically, some people have this personality disorder.

So, God created us Unitarian beings – one person in one being. This is our frame of reference throughout our existence. And this is what makes it most difficult to understand how Yahweh can be a Trinitarian being, three persons in one being. We're one person in one being. From our experience as Unitarian beings, human reason – especially sinful, fallen human reason – just cannot comprehend a Trinitarian being.

But it's not necessary for human reason to comprehend Yahweh as a Trinitarian being. All we need do is receive Yahweh's Trinitarian existence as a great wondrous unsolvable mystery. We will never know what it's like to be a Trinitarian being. And thus we can give Yahweh all the glory. He is Who He is – Father, Son and Holy Spirit! We Unitarian beings exist because Yahweh, a Trinitarian being, exists. He alone is our Creator.

Even though it's difficult to comprehend and speak of a Trinitarian being, nevertheless, Yahweh has given us considerable information about Himself. It's our task to make sense of this information and express it in a confession of faith without error. Yahweh is Who He is.

It's the second level of faith to confess back to Him, You are who You are. And this is most important because without an accurate confession we can't get to the third level of faith – I give myself unreservedly to You, Yahweh, as You truly are. For this reason, grabbing hold of right doctrine and true teaching is most important.

Now, there's an ultimate reason to believe right doctrine. Without correct teaching our faith in God and His Christ will be misplaced or go astray. And without a sound faith in Christ's work we will have to answer for our sins before God on our own. That won't go so well. For, those who ignore or reject sound teaching on the

Creator and His Messiah prove that they are nothing but sinful rebels. They refuse to have God on His terms. And by doing so, they will attempt to dictate their terms to God.

Therefore, how do you think it will go if someone says to God, "You must accept me because of the good things I did in life?" You must accept me! God will say to that person, "I sent my only begotten Son to die for you in order to give you a righteousness better than any you could earn for yourself. Therefore, I only accept Christ's kind of righteousness. Why didn't you believe my good news and rightly believe in Him?" Like I said, it won't go so well for them. This is the importance of taking hold of correct teaching about God so that you may have a real relationship with Yahweh through Jesus Christ.

Our problem is that we're all idolaters by nature. We can't help it. The sinful nature makes us this way. Idolatry is making up gods for ourselves. And we can easily do this even with Yahweh. Instead of saying to Him You are who You are, we can say You are who I want you to be. In effect that's saying, "I created You, Yahweh, now You must respond to me." That's all just backwards, but that's the kind of thing sin does.

And by the way, when we do this, and the god we have created for ourselves seems to let us down, then we get angry at him and shut him down. People who are angry at God are seldom angry at the true God. They're angry at some Paper Mache god they've constructed for themselves. If they knew the true God they would know what truly to expect in life.

So, idolatry is just another reason why we need to come to confession every Sunday and receive absolution. We need to confess to the Lord that we have trouble receiving Him as He really is. Instead, we want to make Him what we want Him to be. But praise God, Jesus Christ died for precisely this. We can be forgiven and healed.

Now, in the early centuries of the church's life there was much controversy over the teaching that Yahweh is a Trinitarian being and His Son, Jesus is both true God and true man. Indeed, both the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were written because of various controversies. Yahweh is not a committee of three gods. He's not one being with three faces or three modes of operation. He is three persons in one being. And one person of the Trinity, Jesus, is fully God and fully human.

The Athanasian Creed settled the outstanding issues concerning the true nature of Jesus as both God and man. But, it roiled the church. The eastern part of the Roman Empire, as well as the part of North Africa in the empire and present day Spain refused the Athanasian Creed and its strong doctrine of Jesus as true God and true man. Those areas held to a weaker doctrine of Jesus. Interestingly, it was precisely those areas that fell to the Muslim conquests in the late 600's and early 700's. The Christians in those areas largely became Muslims. Do you think the weak doctrine of the Trinity and Jesus might have had something to do with that?

On the other hand, most of Europe adopted the Athanasian Creed and has resisted Islam down to the present. The Athanasian Creed is long and complex but it introduces a critical word to the Christian faith – catholic. Here's how that creed ends. "This is the catholic faith. One cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully."

What does the term catholic mean? It's a translation of the Greek word that means universal. And what does universal mean? It means everywhere at all times. In other words if human beings were to travel to the far side of the known universe, Yahweh and Jesus Christ would be the same there as here. That's the catholic faith.

So, the word, catholic, is a big word. It means that the things taught about God in the bible when taught correctly are true everywhere and for all time. But for the last five hundred years the word catholic has been caught up in a subsequent different controversy – a controversy over the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This later controversy actually has nothing to do with the word catholic. Catholic was the word for doctrine about God that was settled in the 400's. Instead, the Reformation controversy developed over a different word, Evangelium – the Greek word for Gospel. For by the early 1500's the church was teaching its people to trust not only in the perfect work of Christ for salvation, but in their own imperfect good works as a necessary addition to the work of Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches this way to the present day. And it makes for dreadful confusion. Some people will foolishly believe that by their own good works they have done enough for salvation. Others will despair that they can never do enough to be saved. Unfortunately, this controversy was never settled by a further creed and it remains open to this day.

In addition the Reformation controversy over the Gospel led to corollary controversies over the nature of faith, the ultimate source of the church's authority, the role of tradition, the role of God's Law, the role of good works and the nature of true church government among other controversies. Again, to this day, these controversies have never been settled by further creeds.

Instead, the church has fractured into competing branches, one of which is the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, Rome claims that they are the true inheritors of the term catholic – the right teaching about God – even though their preaching and teaching of the gospel is quite defective along with their reliance on tradition.

Lutherans seldom make the claim that they are the true Catholic Church. But, that is the case. We teach the true God according to the three universal creeds – Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian. That's what makes us catholic. And we teach the true gospel – salvation by grace through faith. That's what makes us Evangelium or Evangelical in English. This makes us Evangelical and catholic.

Unfortunately, a newer controversy has roiled the church in the last two centuries. This controversy doubts the nature and reliability of the bible itself. Thus, those adhering to the position of doubt have abandoned the teaching that the bible is of divine origin and is completely reliable in all that it teaches. They doubt that the Law of Moses is of divine origin. They doubt Jesus was born of a virgin and that He was bodily resurrected from the dead. The doubters have won over large swaths of Protestantism in the West. Unfortunately, most Lutherans in the U.S. are among the doubters these days.

Consequently, we've had to make a distinction between this congregation and the doubters who claim to be Lutheran. Unfortunately, a good word has not yet been coined to make that distinction. About the best way we can describe ourselves is

“Bible-believing,” meaning that we believe in and teach the bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God.

So here at Trinity we are Bible-believing, evangelical and catholic. We believe the bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God, just as Scripture itself teaches. We are evangelical in the sense that we preach the true gospel without confusing human good works into it, just as the bible teaches. We are catholic in the sense that we correctly preach the identity of the one true God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, just as the bible teaches. This is our identity in Christ.

These are things worth celebrating on this Holy Trinity Sunday. And since it’s also Father’s Day, let us bring attention to the importance of Christian fathers understanding and living the true biblical, evangelical and catholic faith. On Mother’s Day I spoke about the necessity of breathing the Christian faith into children as their identity in life. Jesus makes us who we are.

Well, it’s just as necessary for fathers to do that as mothers. And it’s never too late. If we first let our Father in heaven breathe into us His Holy Spirit so that we might identify completely with Messiah, then if children or grandchildren are young, we can breathe Christ’s identity into them. If not, we can accurately portray that identity to our children, no matter what their age. For our Father in heaven dearly loves His people. As it says in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” A blessed Trinity Sunday and Father’s Day to all. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.

Error: It was the Nicene Creed that roiled the church. The Athanasian was a follow up to it.