

January 16, 2005
College Baptist Church

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The Trinity
Eph 4:1-11

"We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons; that these are equal in every divine perfection, and that they execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption."

One God in three persons, blessed Trinity. One Spirit, One Lord, One God and Father of all, who as one being is over all and through all and in all. This affirmation about the triune God we worship is the truth that brings us together as a church. It is the truth that defines us as a church.

Last week's affirmation about the Word of God is crucial because it provides our foundation of how we know what the truth is. This week's affirmation, and the three that will follow it, unfolding the three persons of the trinity, are even more crucial because these affirmations identify from the Word of God what that truth is that forms the church's one foundation, the solid rock on which we stand.

If there is no truth, then the Word of God has nothing to tell us. The Word of God is central not because it's a word, but because it is the Word *of God*. This week's affirmation summarizes what the Christian church has learned and inferred from the revelations of God recorded in Scriptures about who God is.

You could listen to today's affirmation about the trinity as a lesson in theological vocabulary, but it's really a lesson about the object and the focus of our love.

Thinking of the affirmation about the trinity as just a theological lesson would be like bringing a love letter to an English class to make it an illustration of English grammar. Reading this affirmation without falling on our knees in worship would be like having a conversation with a bunch of your friends about someone you know, while that friend is in the room with you, but without ever including the friend you're talking about in the conversation.

God didn't come to this service this morning to listen to us give his eulogy. He's alive, he's present, and he came to this service to be loved and worshiped, not just talked about.

God, the triune God that this affirmation describes, is here in this sanctuary with us this morning. He is with us wherever we are. He is the One we love most, the One we need most in the entire Universe. If I were to give this sermon right, I should deliver it the way St Augustine wrote his Confessions: in the second person. "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they come to rest in You!"

When this affirmation turns our attention this morning to God, let's allow it to turn our attention not just to a lot of conceptual vocabulary from the history of the Christian Church. Let's allow it to turn our attention to -- and deepen our interest in and love for -- God, who calls us here this morning to worship.

(Lord, we acknowledge your presence here in this service of worship this morning. Accept our prayer that you will be lifted up and glorified and understood more carefully and intimately because of what we learn today of the truths about you. Through Christ our Lord.)

Next week we'll focus on God the Father; the week after that on God the Son; and then in February, when we gather again for communion, we'll think in particular about the Holy Spirit. So I'll not dwell too much today on any one of the persons of the trinity. Our main task today is to think about what it means that the one God, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things, exists in the mystery of three persons.

And this is a mystery. Sermons about the trinity, language about God -- they'll always fall short. Our human words are finite boxes and they'll never adequately contain all the truth of an infinite God. But that doesn't mean we can't formulate affirmations that are true and accurate and helpful (vertically) to our worship and (horizontally) to our daily living.

We've met this doctrine of the trinity this morning in the confession of the Apostles Creed; we've met it in the Gloria Patri; we've met it in the BGC Affirmation; we've met it in a couple of scripture texts already. Wherever we may find it, what I'd like to do in today's sermon is to point out three very helpful things this doctrine of the trinity does for us, and why it's so useful to formulate our understanding of God this way.

So what helpful things does the Doctrine of the Trinity do for us?

#1: the doctrine distills scripture -- it expresses, it systematizes, it distills the manifold and various claims that scripture makes about God into a coherent and consistent whole. So, in distilling Scripture, it helps us to understand God.

#2: the doctrine of the trinity distinguishes those who understand God truly from those who have a false understanding of him; that is, it distinguishes true churches from false ones. It draws boundaries that (internally) define the orthodox Christian church and that (externally) distinguish it from other religious groups that have missed the truth. So it gives us (internally) discernment of who we are, and it gives us (externally) a mission to those who need to hear the truth.

#3: the doctrine of the trinity should delight the believer. When we understand the trinitarian nature of God, we can be reassured that God's needs for fellowship and love are already perfectly met long before he ever created us. That means (a) that God is perfectly happy and satisfied, not needy; and it therefore means further (b) that the fellowship God is inviting us to join is eternally and perfectly satisfying, and not a fearful thing at all.

So, first, how does the doctrine of the Trinity help us by **distilling** Scripture's understanding of God? As I said before, a God who reveals himself to us by prophets and in these last days, as Hebrews 1 says, by a Son, a God who inhabits eternity, is even more a mystery to us than other humans are. We scarcely understand one another; sometimes people are a genuine enigma to us. But we usually arrive at some reasonable conclusions because people reveal themselves to us by their words and their actions. God also reveals himself to us by his words and his actions, but he is so far above our finite, human experience that words are often inadequate. He is too infinite to fit inside the boxes of our human reasoning. But that doesn't mean we can't know him.

There are at least a couple of ways that the Word of God can succeed in communicating God's unlimited, infinite, eternal complexity to us. Good trinitarian theology can imitate scripture by using the same couple of strategies.

One is to point out as I've already done that God can't be fit inside our human boxes. Scripture tells us true and reliable things about God when it denies the ways we try to put God in a box. God isn't finite, so, even though we don't quite know all that it means, we know it's a true statement if we call him "infinite." We know he's not mortal, so even if we don't know all it entails we know it's true if we call him "immortal."

This is why so much of the language about the trinity gets formulated in what scholars often call "negative theology" -- statements rejecting what would be a wrong way of describing God as opposed to positive statements of the right way to talk.

"Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes."

Partly we speak in this negative way because it accurately keeps God outside the box. Partly and more practically we describe the mystery of the trinity in this negative fashion because there have always been people who argued for these inaccurate or inadequate ways of talking:

People like Arius, for example, who said that Jesus was only called the Son of God because God "adopted" him as a Son, not because he really was, and so the church has had to put a lot of energy into saying no to challenges like that.

Jesus is not the Son of God by adoption. The essence of Jesus is *not* different from the essence of God the Father. The essence of Jesus is not even just like the essence of God the Father.

Still, in most cases the church has also come around to the second strategy so that it can finally make some kind of a positive affirmation in response to these errors, too.

In the case of Arius, the orthodox Fathers in the church insisted that the Son is the same essence, or as we say in the Apostles Creed, he is of "one substance" with God the Father by whom all things were made.

Eph 4:9-10 tells us that "he who descends is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things." The Son who emptied himself on earth is the same being and essence of God almighty, maker of heaven and earth. In him, Paul said, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell bodily."

The strategy that Scripture and the theologians of the early church have employed to avoid the problem of making God too small by reducing him to the simplicity of our positive human affirmations is to affirm the complexity of God by not settling for a single analogy (that so typically breaks down) but by using lots of differing analogies and affirmations, even if they seem sometimes in tension with each other.

Yes, we make real choices. Yes, God is sovereign and directs our wills. Both of those things are true in the complexity of who God is.

Yes, God is One essence (or substance). Yes, God is three persons. Both of those things are true in the complexity of who God is.

When we talk about God do we have to speak in contradictions then? No, these aren't contradictory things to say, if God is one in a different sense from the way he is three.

Dickens started his novel saying, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." That's not a contradiction if Dickens means it was the best of times in one sense, but the worst of times from another point of view.

Ice and water and steam are three different things, but they're all exactly the same thing. That's not a contradiction if the way they're different refers to their state at a certain temperature and to their formula as the chemical compound H₂O.

So could we talk about one God in three persons on the analogy of water in three forms? The strength of the comparison is that it shows the trinity doesn't have to be accused of dealing in contradictions. But, like most of the analogies we're tempted to use to explain how one being could exist in three persons, the analogy breaks down because we don't think of solid, liquid, and vapor states as having centers of consciousness. The Son is not just liquid God. The Son is a Person.

Or could we say that God is three in the same way that I'm a son, a father, and a husband? Again there are helpful uses for the analogy, and yet it doesn't tell the whole story by a long shot. As a son, a husband, and a father, I am still just one center of consciousness. God is three distinct persons. God the Son prays to God the Father in the garden and finally submits his human will to God's divine will. That's the same in minor ways but different in major ways from how Don the father of Luke might sometime submit his will to Don the husband of Joni.

When we restrict ourselves to one formulation of our understanding of God, that narrowed perspective can lead us to unbiblical conclusions. That's why the Word of God is so rich in imagery and uses the perspective of multiple gospel writers and multiple prophets and apostles to convey its picture of God.

That's why the church has had to wrestle for so long and with so much theological effort to get its expressions right and accurate in the formulation of this affirmation.

So Scripture approaches its description of the complexity and the infinity of God in these two accurate but not very simple ways: it reminds us negatively that God doesn't fit inside any of our finite boxes and, when it speaks positively in ways that do define boxes, it employs enough multiplicity of perspective and analogy that one is reminded again of the limitations of any single way of speaking about God.

But we eventually need to do what we can to make as much coherent sense as we can of the complexity of things that Scripture teaches about God.

That's the first thing that the doctrine of the trinity does so helpfully. It **distills** the complexity of the manifold statements about God from Scripture into something as coherent and consistent and systematic as possible.

Will doctrinal and creedal affirmations always get things perfect? No. No human box is ever going to contain God adequately. But can these doctrinal and creedal formulations speak with truth and accuracy, and can they rightly eliminate positions that are in error? We believe they can. We believe they help the church when they distill the teaching of Scripture for those purposes.

At the same time, as Protestants, and as Baptists in particular, we are going to take care that our affirmations and formulations are corrected by Scripture and not the other way around. That's what we mean when we sing, "My faith has found a resting place not in device or creed. I trust the ever living Word. His blood for me shall plead."

In the century or two after the Reformation, Protestants were so concerned to protect the principle of scripture alone that they wouldn't sing a song that wasn't a psalm taken directly from the Bible and they were wary even of using a term like the Trinity because the word doesn't occur in the Bible.

Eventually Protestants began to recognize that Scripture itself sets a pattern for expressing the Word of God in human words, and so in the same way that we saw last week the principle of the authority of scripture alone expresses scriptural teaching even though it's not expressly put in those words in the Bible, so too the doctrine of the trinity expresses and distills scriptural teaching even though the words we use to talk about it (trinity, person, substance) aren't explicitly in the Bible.

Matthew 28 commands the disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the (one) name of (three distinct persons) the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians, we saw last spring, (the very earliest document we have from the early church) begins with thanks to God for the church's work in the Lord Jesus Christ for a gospel that came in the power of the Holy Spirit. And it ends with the will of God in Christ Jesus, followed immediately by an exhortation not to quench the Spirit. The same kind of trinitarian pattern organizes the first 8 chapters of Romans. And the text we read this morning from Eph 4 also stresses the unity of one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father.

How do we distill all of these teachings? We say with the BGC Affirmation: *"We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons, that these are equal in every divine perfection, and that they execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption."*

We say with Athanasius and the Nicene Creed that the Father and the Son are "homoousion" -- one substance, one essence, one being. The outward appearance of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit may be as different as ice and water and steam, but they are all the same thing, fully God, at the same time.

Or we say with Augustine that the Son is the image or reflection of the Father, an idea that he has of himself that itself is so real that it is a person in its own right with its own consciousness such that the Father regards it as a "you" and not just as a "me." And the Spirit--Augustine says (and others like Jonathan Edwards and CS Lewis echo him in this)--the Spirit is the love and communion that the Father has for and with the Son and that the Son has for and with the Father. And their love for each other is so real and tangible that it too is a person in its own right with its own consciousness such that the Father regards it as a "you" and not just as a "me." It's a kind of bar-bell picture of the three persons (the HS as a kind of bond connecting the Father and the Son mirroring one another at each end) as opposed to the triangle image that some other teachers have used to picture the trinity.

These are all doctrinal formulations, and they all serve the helpful function of distilling what Scripture says, provided they are always brought back to the plumb line of scripture to make sure they speak the straight truth.

The second thing that the doctrine does so helpfully is to use that distillation of scripture's plumb line to **distinguish** the true church from those that have begun to bend the truth with one distortion or another.

A lot of the things the doctrine of the trinity has come to say turn out to be couched in negative terms, to say this is what God is not, because they've been defined in the competition of truth with the attempts of error to get the upper hand.

These affirmations of the BGC, like all doctrinal affirmations get spelled out like this because they are boundary-defining issues. Because the BGC believes, and because we believe, this is where the truth lies and not there, this is where we stand, and this is who we are.

We saw this last week: the affirmation that the Word of God alone holds final, trustworthy supreme, authority in all matters of our faith and conduct distinguishes us as a Protestant church from the Roman church that puts the church's Magisterium into that position of final authority.

This week's affirmation--that the one God exists in three persons--is a belief that we share with the church of Rome, but it sets the orthodox church apart from some other groups by a very important, defining boundary.

Judaism, for example--not as the religion of the Old Testament, which still leaves room for a trinitarian view of God, but the interpretation of the Jews that rejects the deity of Jesus Christ--uses its monotheism to reject the New Testament's trinitarian view of God.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord," says the creed of Judaism. And the Jews who reject Jesus' divinity say, See? that disqualifies the trinity because it makes God three. But as we've seen, it doesn't necessarily do any such thing. In fact, if it did make God into three Gods ("tritheism" instead of monotheism) then the orthodox Christian church would renounce that view of the trinity, too!

God isn't three gods. There is one body and one Spirit; one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Christianity is as monotheistic as Judaism. But the God of the Old Testament who "sends forth his Spirit" (Ps 104:30 --Call to Worship) and the God of the Old Testament who exalts his Servant who suffers and by whose stripes his people are healed (Isa 53) is a God of sufficient complexity not to let his monotheistic essence preclude his existing in three persons.

The affirmation of the trinity says the Christian Church believes Judaism makes a grave mistake in rejecting the deity of Jesus Christ.

The same arguments apply to Islam. Muslims reject Christianity not because they have different starting places. They both trace themselves back to Abraham. They both accept the Old Testament as the revelation from the one, true God. But the followers of Muhammad and the Qur'an reject Christianity because they believe the deity of Christ won't reconcile with their basic creed of monotheism: There is but one God, whose name is Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. So was Jesus. Just a prophet. The doctrine of the trinity reminds us that Islam is in need of the truth about Jesus Christ if they are ever to be in right relationship to God.

The dangers of abandoning the doctrine of the trinity are most evident when we look at so-called churches that start with the New Testament but then reject the trinity. The generic name for this departure is "Unitarianism" (as opposed to trinitarian belief). From a Unitarian web site I read this: "Unitarianism rejects the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity, or three Persons in one God, made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit." In fact, the web site went on: "Not all Unitarians believe in God or even use the word. Some find the word 'God' meaningless, others believe it is too burdened with wrong ideas to be useful." "Unitarians may accept many ideas of God as valid," it said, including "the ideals and aspirations of humanity" or "the still small voice within us."

The difference always comes down to the view of Jesus Christ. Their site says Unitarians "typically believe that God is one being - God the Father, or Mother. Jesus was simply a man, not the incarnate deity." By their convictions:

- * Jesus was a man, not God
- * Jesus was not physically resurrected
- * Jesus was a Jewish prophet with a mission of reconciliation
- * Jesus was filled with divine inspiration
- * Jesus is a supreme example of living with integrity and compassion
- * Jesus' life is reflective of the divine potential in all of us

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity stands against this dilution of biblical teaching about Jesus Christ.

In a very similar way, the doctrine of the trinity defines a boundary line between Jehovah's Witnesses and the orthodox Christian church. As the Jehovah's Witnesses read John 1:1, Jesus was just "a god," not "the God." Essentially he was a lesser being, distinct from God, like the angels, or like the prophets. So there's no divine, eternal salvation to be found in Jesus Christ according to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In fact there's no going to heaven to be with God at all for anybody in the salvation of the JW's, except for a select 144,000. And they don't believe

you're one of those. Chances are the people who ring your doorbell with the Watchtower don't even think they are among the 144,000 either.

So the doctrine of the trinity helps us to **discern and distinguish** boundaries between what's true and what's false. But more importantly it points us as a church to our mission. The burden we feel when people are outside the boundary where our doctrines distinguish truth from error is not a burden of pride that we're right and condemnation that they're wrong. It's a burden of love that they're missing the joy of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Doctrinal error is a call to love and to mission. Evangelism, as Bonhoeffer so helpfully described it, is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread.

Doctrine **distills**. Doctrine defines and **distinguishes**. Lastly, doctrine **delights**.

Especially the doctrine of the trinity should **delight** and entice us and those outside our doctrinal boundaries into the love of God. The distillation of scripture in the doctrine of the trinity tells us that God exists as a community of love. The Father loves the Son with the love of the Holy Spirit. The Son loves the Father with that same love of the Spirit. What should we conclude is offered to us then in the gift of the Holy Spirit? We are invited into the very community of love with which God loves Jesus Christ. That was a love that resurrected Jesus bodily even though he bore the sins of the entire world. What could be a more massive enticement to give your heart to God than that?

God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have existed from eternity past and will exist into eternity future with God the Father in this state of infinitely fulfilling love. They couldn't be more satisfied. We have nothing to add to their satisfaction. When they come to us offering us their love, it can't possibly be because they're wanting something back from us. They couldn't possibly be loving us out of need. They are eternally, infinitely happy already.

That, Paul tells Timothy (1 Tim 1:11), is the essence of the gospel. It is the gospel of a blessed God. Literally, the good news of a happy God. The doctrine of the trinity is the delight that the God who invites us to share his love isn't out to get anything from us because he's already as happy and fulfilled as he can be.

He loves us because, like a good parent, his joy comes from having the resources to overflow into the fulfilling of the needs of his children. That is a reason to worship the God who is present in this sanctuary with us right now. Here he is: happy, fulfilled, and waiting to give us his Holy Spirit of loving communion and eternal joy that he shares with all three persons of his being.

God in three persons: blessed Trinity!