

“God in Three Persons” Romans 5:1-5

*Holy, Holy, Holy; Lord God Almighty
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, Holy, Holy; merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.¹*

We sang this hymn this morning. And hymns have powerful theological meaning, as does this one. But often times we sing them without thinking. And it is only when we come to a crisis in our lives or need a biblical or theological answer to a difficult question that that certain tune comes back with such rich words.

This is one of them. But this one is a humdinger. A theological conundrum. God in three Persons! When you really begin to think about it, your head starts to hurt. The doctrine of the Trinity has Excedrin written all over it!

But this is the message we get from Scripture. Listen again to the short passage from Romans this morning:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with GOD through our LORD JESUS CHRIST, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the HOLY SPIRIT, whom he has given us.

Now, this is a marvelous text. On another day, we could look at the concept of suffering and perseverance addressed here. But since you would like to probably be home before sunset, I will simply stick to one aspect of this text.

Did you see what Paul did here in Romans with this? He named the three persons of God. We have been in trouble, he implies with God the Father, until we are justified through his Son Jesus Christ. Now we have peace with the Father. And God pours down his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. In five verses, here in the Letter to the Romans, Paul discusses God in Three Persons.

Now, it is important to note that the word “Trinity” never appears in the Bible. But we hold this doctrine as orthodox in historic Christian thought. Indeed, we name churches, universities, rivers and the like after this doctrine. But we don’t like to talk about it much. God in Three Persons: One in Three, Three in One. It is confusing and relegated to the world of the ignored facts or mysteries of the Bible. Shirley Guthrie points out

¹ From Reginald Heber’s hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” traditionally sung to the tune of NICAEA.

that this is the type of thinking that comes up in Sunday School with this sort of conversation:

One person asks: “Do we have to believe all this business about one-in-three and three-in-one to be Christians”?

“Yes,” says the teacher, “the church has always held that the doctrine of the Trinity is essential.”

“Well, what does it mean? How can you put three persons together and get one, or divide one person into three parts and still have one?”

The defender of the faith then blunders through a fuzzy explanation, and concludes hopelessly, “It’s a mystery no one can understand. You just have to accept it by faith.”

Then some people say, “Well, if you’re supposed to believe it, I guess I do – whatever it is.” And more honest people think to themselves, “If no one knows what it means, and no one can explain it, it can’t really be all that important.”²

And so we either ignore it on one hand or we over-explain it on the other. This is what the early church fathers did. Listen to how Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt tried to explain the Trinity in the 4th C:

We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated: the Son uncreated: and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father incomprehensible: the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal: the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated: nor three incomprehensibles, but one uncreated: and one incomprehensible.³

Are you still with me? That should be *incomprehensible* enough for anyone! It’s like the man in the shopping center who had a heart attack. A priest was summoned to administer the last rites. The priest knelt down by the man and asked “Do you believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?” The stricken man weakly raised his head and said to the bystanders, “Here I am dying and this man wants me to answer a riddle!”

Again, Guthrie notes:

It is true that “three persons in one Godhead” is a riddle no one can understand. Augustine, who wrote a long book about it, said that he spoke of it only in order not to keep silent. And the great 20th C theologian Karl Barth wrote “When we

² Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968), 90.

³ This quote is taken from what has traditionally been called the “Athanasian Creed” or *Quicumque Vult*. Unanimously attributed to Athanasius through the seventeenth century, it is now thought to have been written in the fifth century but still contains much of the argument Athanasius might have made against the Arians.

have said what is meant by Father, Son and Spirit of God, we must continue, and say that we have said nothing.” But this mystery is far too central to the Christian faith either to be unthinkingly accepted because we are supposed to, or to be casually shrugged off because no one can explain it. If it were only a mathematical puzzle or a numbers game, we might either take someone’s word for the solution, or simply say we are not interested. But the doctrine of the Trinity is far more than that.⁴

Personally, I like the word “mystery” for this. *A mystery, says one theologian, is a profound yet inexplicable truth that human beings can both know and not understand.* And the Trinity is a mystery which belongs in the pulpits of churches, as Augustine said, not because we are able to comprehend it, but because we simply cannot keep silent on a matter so central to the worship of God.

We tell the story of the God of Israel, creator of the universe, who gathers a people, binding them to himself by name and sacrifice and prophetic Word. For hundreds of years, the Lord disciplines and shapes his people into faithful witnesses and joyful worshippers. In the fullness of time, God sends his Son, the promised Messiah, as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

So we tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of this God, born to and into God’s people. Prophet, teacher, healer, bearer of God’s kingdom. Jesus confronts Israel with the exhilarating message of the incomparable love of the One he calls Father, a love revolutionary in its unconditionality and grace, a love that demands new garments and new wineskins, conversion and discipleship, death and rebirth. This Jesus, however, is intolerable; his message and presence are too threatening. He is betrayed, denounced, humiliated, executed as a common criminal. But the Father vindicates his Son on Easter morning by raising him from the dead and exalting him to his right hand, establishing him as the destiny and conclusion of all creation. And as the Son ascends into heaven, he promises his disciples the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And so we tell the story of the Holy Spirit, the divine wind that moved over the waters of chaos “in the beginning,” who spoke through Moses and the prophets, who anointed Jesus with invincible power to heal the sick, exorcize evil, raise the dead. It is the Spirit that the Son of God promises to pour out on the community of faith – the love of the Father and the Son.

Pick out any point of history, and you’ll find the church telling the story of the Trinity and promising that story as good news. It is this story that provides the content for our preaching and worship, for we baptize, sing our doxologies, and give our benedictions using the names of the triune God.

Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples in the 15th chapter of John:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his

⁴ Guthrie, 90.

own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

Jesus tells us here of the interconnectedness of the Son to the Spirit and the Son to the Father. And so, we tell the story. But beyond telling the story of the Trinity, the doctrine of “God in Three Persons” works to overcome the corruptions and heresies of what Christians might otherwise think about God and God’s dealing with humanity.

Here are some of the corruptions that theologian Shirley Guthrie gives that the Trinity answers:

The first is that God is an angry God who wanted to punish us because we are not good. But Jesus loved us and died to pay for our sins, so God had to let us go free. God would still like to get us, but he can’t, because Jesus keeps him from it. Jesus, our Savior who loves us, saves us from God, the righteous Judge, who hates us.

But the doctrine of the Trinity means that the will and action of Jesus is the same as the will and action of God. It means that if Christ is for us, nothing can be against us, including God himself. God is for us.

The second corruption is that in the beginning there were three Gods up in heaven. At first the Father himself came down to deal with his people. Then he sent his Son. And after the Son went back up to heaven, the Holy Spirit came down.

But the doctrine of the Trinity means that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not a heavenly club, with the members coming & going like the gods of pagan mythology, or like substitutes in a football game. Christians believe in One God, not a team of Gods.

The third distortion or corruption of Christian faith is the concept that the Holy Spirit makes us to be spiritual people by helping us be concerned about such spiritual things as prayer, worship, and church activities. But he has nothing to do with such “worldly” things as sex, buying and selling, paying taxes, playing or voting.

But the doctrine of the Trinity means that the Spirit is the Spirit of God who is Creator and Ruler of heaven AND earth. He is the Spirit of the Christ who was a flesh and blood human being, the same Christ who is Lord over ALL of life. What does a spiritual life mean if the work of the Spirit is not to deny but to RENEW our natural, material life in a world created and governed by the Father and the Son?⁵

Understanding this “God in Three Persons” then, this concept of a Trinitarian God, leads us to understand who God is, how God interacts with us and with those around us. We need this God, we need him in his Three Persons:

First, we need God the Father, the great God who is over and above us. A boy once expressed to his own father that God could never hear or answer the prayers of over 6 billion people in the world. His father replied, “It depends on how big your God is, son.” So, we need Almighty God, as the Old Testament refers to him. We need God the Father who is able to do far above all that we can ask or think. We need the infinite God who is for us, with such power, that nothing can be against us. We cannot live without the Father.

⁵ Guthrie, 91.

But we need also God the Son, Jesus Christ. We need more than a God of power, majesty, and holiness. We need a God who is with us, who cares for us, touches us at our most tender points, dies for us in our most deadly malady of sin. In Jesus, God became personal, knowable, . . . human. In Jesus, we can see, hear, and touch GOD.

And lastly, we need the Spirit. We need God in us and with us here and now. The Spirit is in us to make us good and godly in thought, emotion, word and deed, to produce within us the fruits of love, joy peace patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We cannot make ourselves good. We can't even make ourselves HUMAN. Only in God's Spirit can we live with integrity and honor.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery." This God is in Three Persons, but he is One God. And the mystery who is above us, reigning for us, and working in us is the one and the same!

Do you remember in the seventies, the song written by Don McLean called "American Pie"? It was a non-sensical song in which, I think he *accidentally* spoke the truth. I heard it recently on a juke box while on vacation with my family in one of those 50s retro burger places, and quite frankly I can tell you I was displeased that it did not play the full 15 minutes of the song for my quarter, so that it would get to the ending, which, I think, was the best part. You remember?

*The three men I admire most,
The Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
They caught the last train for the coast,
The day the music died.*

You can bet your last dollar: If Father, Son and Holy Ghost ever catch the the train for the coast, . . . the music . . . will die. But as long as God remains in three Persons, we can sing:

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee:
Holy, Holy Holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

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

Amen.

Brian C. Brewer
DaySpring Baptist Church
Waco, Texas

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