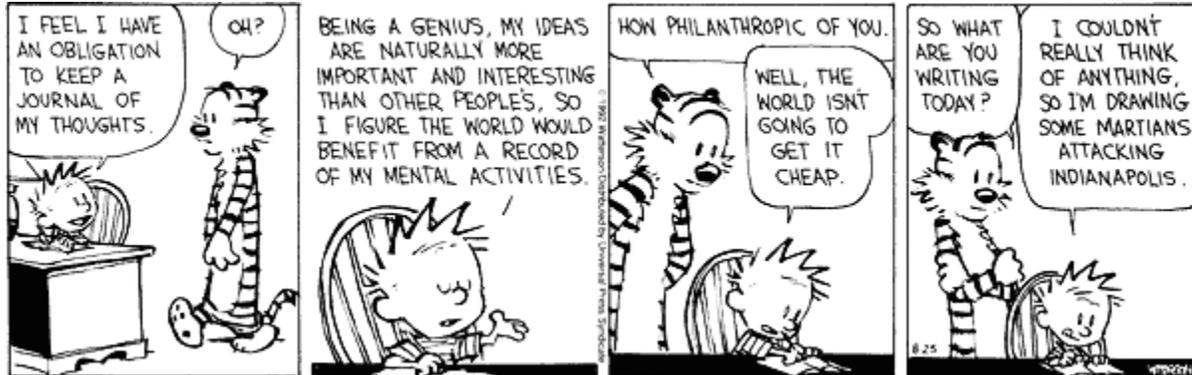


C Trinity  
2013 May 26  
Romans 5.1-11  
John 15.26-16.15  
“One and Three”



Today we want to spend some time considering the church’s doctrine of the Trinity, that is, that the God we worship is somehow, and wonderfully, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This doctrine is the result of careful study of scripture by many brilliant people, over many centuries. However, unlike our friend Calvin, the doctrine which they discovered in the pages of scripture is real, living, and of priceless value,

I own a really large concordance of the Bible. It lists every occurrence of every major word in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is the one that's in the pew pockets in front of you. But I can turn alphabetically to the place where “Trinity” should appear, and sure enough, there is no listing there. Those who claim that the word “Trinity” appears nowhere in the Bible are absolutely right. It does not.

So how in the world did the church come up with this confounding, confusing, and difficult doctrine? In part the development of the Trinitarian doctrine came about because all of the alternatives were much worse.

Consider, first of all, that the steadfast testimony of both the Hebrew and the Greek scriptures, the Old and the New Testaments, is that there is only one God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who encountered Moses on the mountain called Sinai and revealed his name to be I AM. The God who redeemed his people, the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and gave them a land of their own, called Canaan, in the hill country north and east of the Dead Sea.

The God who made a covenant with his people to be their God, and they would be his people. The God who called that same people time and again to faithfulness through the prophets, and still the people would not listen. The God who then sent them into exile in Babylon, and who released them from that exile and returned them home.

The God who finally came among us in a man, one Jesus of Nazareth, who, according to the scriptures, died at the hands of sinful people and was raised to life again, who reigns even today with his Father until the time is right for his return in glory.

And there's the rub. No human being can reign in power next to the Father, so Christ must be divine. But there is only one God, so Christ must also be incorporated into this one God, somehow. Remember the prologue to John's gospel? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." A few verses later John makes it clear that this Word is none other than the Jesus of Nazareth whose story is told in the gospel. John also writes in chapter one, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." The theme of Jesus' divinity is especially prevalent in John, but you find it throughout the New Testament.

So in classical Christian doctrine, we are forced at least into adopting the doctrine of a God who is both Father and Son, or else we become polytheists, believing in more than one God. And we surely can't do that.

Then how does the Holy Spirit become incorporated? There are a number of key passages, such as the very end of Matthew, where Jesus commands his followers to go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that he had commanded.

And then there is the trinitarian blessing which I almost always use at the close of our worship services, which is found at the end of Second Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." And then there is the account of Jesus being baptized in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In all of these accounts the Spirit descends on Jesus, and a voice from heaven declares that this Jesus is God's son, with whom God is well-pleased. There is a similar account in John's gospel, the first chapter, in which Jesus, the Spirit, and the one who sent John the Baptist all converge, even though John does not record an explicit baptism of Jesus.

There are a number of other places where Father, Son, and Spirit appear in close conjunction too, including today's readings from Romans and John.

The early scholars and thinkers of the church prayed and cogitated over these matters for some three hundred years before the Nicene Creed was finalized and adopted in the year 381 AD. But there was an even earlier trinitarian creed, the Apostles' Creed, whose roots may date to earlier than 200 AD. So even by the end of the second century, the church in Europe and Asia Minor was confessing a God who is one and yet three.

There is another ancient creed of the church, the Athanasian Creed, which has been attributed to the fourth century theologian Athanasius. Bear with me while I read for you a part of this statement.

We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being.

For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another.

But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty.

What the Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit.

Uncreated is the Father; uncreated is the Son; uncreated is the Spirit.

The Father is infinite; the Son is infinite; the Holy Spirit is infinite.

Eternal is the Father; eternal is the Son; eternal is the Spirit: And yet there are not three eternal beings, but one who is eternal; as there are not three uncreated and unlimited beings, but one who is uncreated and unlimited.

Almighty is the Father; almighty is the Son; almighty is the Spirit: And yet there are not three almighty beings, but one who is almighty.

Thus the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God: And yet there are not three gods, but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord; the Son is Lord; the Holy Spirit is Lord: And yet there are not three lords, but one Lord.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten; the Son was neither made nor created, but was alone begotten of the Father; the Spirit was neither made nor created, but is proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Thus there is one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three sons; one Holy Spirit, not three spirits.

And in this Trinity, no one is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal; and so we must worship the Trinity in unity and the one God in three persons.

So far I have done a pretty good job of avoiding what our scripture readings for today have to say about the triune God. So let me spend a little time dealing with that reading from the sixteenth chapter of John, only one, remember, of many such passages that connect Spirit, Son, and Father.

John 16 is of course a part of that Farewell Discourse that Jesus delivers to his disciples on the night of his arrest, preparing them to carry his message and ministry forward in his absence. But not really in his absence, because he is going to send to them an

Advocate, who will come to them from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who will testify about Jesus.

It is this Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will be the presence of Christ with the fragile band of disciples, providing help, comfort, strength, and guidance for them as they preach an minister in the name of Jesus. And that is, of course, what the Holy Spirit still does with us today.

A little later Jesus says to his anxious followers, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine." Here again we have Father, Son, and Spirit sharing together in the divine purpose. And here the divine purpose is the delivery of a message, the message of truth.

The testimony of all of scripture is that the Father, Son, and Spirit are coequal, as stated in the Athanasian Creed. It is furthermore the testimony of scripture that Father, Son, and Spirit share a divine love one for another, which is seen in our reading from John 16 and in a number of other passages. It is the love expressed when the Father says at Jesus' baptism, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And if you and I are indeed made in the image of God, as we read in Genesis and elsewhere, then we are also designed to demonstrate the same love for one another, both those who are explicit followers of Jesus, and those who are not, or at least not yet.

In other words, if the triune God is love, and we are made in the image of God, then we are made to love one another, in the same agape way, self-giving, self-sacrificing, always seeking the good of the other.

God is Father, Son, and Spirit, yet still one God. It's not easy to grasp, but it is altogether wonderful.