

## **“OUR THREE PERSONAL GOD.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA**

**May 31, 2015, 10:30AM**

**Text for the Sermon: Genesis 1:3, 26; John 14:16, 26; 15:26**

**Prayer:** O God, who are we that we can discern the wonder of your mysterious Trinity. Yet Lord without knowledge how can we love you and worship you? Father, carry us to a deeper understanding of your nature and your character. Grant us a glimpse of your glory and majesty. Grant us a deeper love and greater understanding of who you are. Hear our prayer, help us by your Holy Spirit, we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

### **Introduction.**

**The Trinity. If it was easy everybody would believe it.**

*His name is Abdyl Xhaja.* He used to be a high ranking cabinet member in the government of Albania. His family background was Muslim. Around 1998 knowing very little English, he immigrated his family to OKC to give his children a better life.

He attended our church there for a number of years. As his English improved he listened intently to the sermons and asked questions. There was one thing that just did not make sense to him and he couldn't accept it. The doctrine of the Trinity. Paul says in I Corinthians 1 the gospel is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. But to Muslims it's both. They think we are crazy to have three gods and to say that the man Jesus was God. He couldn't buy it.

For those of us who have been raised Christian and have grown up immersed in good Biblical teaching and preaching we don't appreciate how big a deal this is and how controversial it is in the rest of the world.

To believe in *one God is easy*. There are two major monotheistic faiths in the world, Islam and Judaism. And to believe in *many gods is even easier*. There are many polytheistic religions in the world like Hinduism (third largest religion, 80% of India), Buddhism (fourth largest religion, Tibet, China, SE Asia), Taoism (up to 30% of China) and Shintoism (80% of Japan).

**But when we say there is one God who is three persons**, each of whom is fully God, that's not so easy. This belief sets Christianity apart from all other religions.

No human would make up a religion like Christianity. Nobody would have come up with something like the Trinity apart from God Himself revealing it.

The whole idea of the Trinity defies human understanding. Jesus being fully God and fully human is tough. And the Bible being fully inspired by God and written by humans is a challenge. But the Trinity is the Mount Everest of doctrines, that highest and hardest mountain to climb.

Let me state as plainly as I can, the Trinity is absolutely crucial to our understanding of God. In fact if we get this wrong we will get everything else wrong, and to deny it is heresy.

At the center of every cult is disagreement over the Trinity. The Muslims totally disagree with it. So do Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Unitarians, the Unity church, the United Pentecostals, and many others. When they come to your door they have been trained how to refute the Trinity and they are not without much success.

### **Trinity Heresies and the great historical defense of the Trinity.**

Two who got it wrong and one who got it right.

Have you ever read a book and then seen the movie? And have you ever been disappointed how the movie didn't do the book justice?

**Imagine** three different directors taking this book and turning it into a play.

The first director was an Italian named *Sabellius*, he lived in Rome in the early third century (c. 198 – 220 AD). His play only need one actor who could play all three parts, but he would have to run off stage to change costumes because he could only play one part at a time. One God with three masks, three outfits. God was one, single, indivisible person, revealing Himself to man in time, first as the Father in creation, then as the Son in redemption, and finally as the Spirit in sanctification. Basically one God wearing three different hats and only one at a time.

The second director was a North African named *Arius*, from Libya in the late third century (c. 256-336 AD). His play required three separate individuals to act out the roles and the first actor must be greater than the other two and must have been around longer than the other two (maybe Harrison Ford and Matthew McConaughey). Jesus and the Holy Spirit were created by the Father, and not equal to the Father.

The reviews for the first two plays were horrible. They were soundly condemned. Their plays did not come close to the original book. The most major critical review written against these two plays was written in 325 AD and was called the **Nicene Creed**.

The third director's name was *Athanasius*. He was born in Egypt (c. 296-373 AD). He was the Bishop of Alexandria and the great defender of the Trinity. He said, "God is a great enough being to play all three parts—to actually be three Persons on the stage at the same time." He has always been three Persons, living out three roles, though He is only and always one God. His play got great reviews and even has a creed named after him, Athanasian Creed.

### **Trinity. Explained in three (easy?) phrases.**

The simplest way to try to summarize Biblical teaching of this truth is in three propositions: **There is one God. God is three persons. Each person is fully God.**

#### ***There is one God.***

That there is one and only **one God** is clearly affirmed again and again in Scripture. God is only one being. The most famous passage of this is the great Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4:

**Deuteronomy 6:4** Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is *one*. **5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

In the NT as well there are several texts that say, "There is one God" (I Timothy 2:5, I Corinthians 8:6) and "God is one" (Romans 3:30).

### ***God is three distinct persons.***

But this one God eternally exists as **three distinct persons**, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. Each is a distinct person. There is a plurality in the Godhead.

Each member of the Trinity thinks, acts, feels, speaks, and relates because they are persons and not impersonal forces.

We know God exists. The Trinity describes how God's exists. Numerically God is one. But in this unity, in this oneness, there are three distinct persons who are really, truly, and eternally distinct, in person, personality and roles.

This is first hinted at in the very first chapter of the Bible.

**Genesis 1:1-3** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 ... And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 And God said ...” (the Word was with God).

Again in Genesis 1 we hear God say, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after our likeness.” It makes you wonder how long the ancient Jews wrestled with the meaning of those plural pronouns.

### ***In the NT the mystery in the shadows gives way to light.***

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God” (John 1:1), two distinct persons.

At the baptism of Jesus all three persons of the Godhead were present.

**Matthew 3:16** And when Jesus was baptized ... and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove ... **17** and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus said, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

Jesus says He not it, the Holy Spirit is a distinct person.

We hear the Trinity in the common NT benediction in **II Corinthians 13:14**: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Jesus commands us to baptize in the name (singular, unity) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Not in the names of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, not three gods, but in the name of the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **Each distinct person is fully God.**

Each person shares fully and completely in all the one divine essence. All of God's attributes are true of all three persons. Each is eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, infinitely wise, infinitely holy, infinitely just, and infinitely righteous.

### ***They are co-eternal.***

The Father is ever existing.

The Son is eternally begotten of the Father.

The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.

***They are co-equal.***

They are co-equal in all things related to the Godhead. They are God. They all share the same essence. The Holy Spirit is not just the power of God, the Holy Spirit is God and shares the same power as the Father and the Son.

We worship each of them because each of them is worthy to be worship, each one is fully God.

**Trinity Application. It's all around us.**

So what? Isn't all this just important to theologians and some pastors? How does it relate to farmers and families and freshmen in college? In Trinitarian fashion let me give three reasons why the Trinity matters and show what difference it makes.

***Unity and Diversity.***

What does it mean for us to live in a universe created by a tri-personal God?  
How does our world reflect the image of this kind of creator?

Our world is filled with unity and diversity. This planet is an incredibly interdependent environmental system, very diverse but working together. The human body is a miraculously diverse system of parts all making up one body. Look at a beehive or an ant colony and we see millions of diverse moving parts all working in harmony.

An athletic team or an orchestra or a precision drill team are all great pictures of diversity and unity. The church is a great mix of gifts all serving one body. Do we appreciate the diversity here or do we wish everyone was Dutch, or everyone liked the same kind of music? Do we see the value and importance of each of us making a contribution and valuing the contribution of each other?

Marriage is two diverse people becoming one. Do we appreciate the differences and are we seeking to create a harmony between the differences or do we try to squash them?

Our world reflects our creator in its unity and diversity.

***Love.***

In the movie *Castaway*, the star Tom Hanks finds himself marooned on a south pacific island by himself for four years. It's an interesting portrayal of a man absolutely isolated and how he struggles to maintain mental and emotional sanity in utter loneliness.

Can any of us even begin to fathom four years alone on an island? Four years of no conversation, four years of no human interaction, no TV, cell phones, texting or Facebook?

Now consider this. What was it like for God for millions of years of eternity before He created the earth and mankind? Millions and millions of years alone, as if on a deserted island, living in a deserted universe.

To say that God is love makes no sense if for all of those millions and millions of years God was alone and had no one with whom to give and receive love, no one to communicate with and to express love.

In order for God to be love, in the Godhead there must be a diversity in the unity, an ability to love and be loved, to give and receive and share love.

Love cannot exist where there is not a plurality of persons. Other religions that have no concept of the Trinity have trouble explaining how God could be loving and relational.

The love we know and experience is the overflowing love of God in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

At the center of the universe is a core relationship. Out of God's essential relationship within Himself, comes His desire to be in relationship with us and our ability to be in a relationship with Him. *God created us to be able to walk in the garden in the cool of the evening with Him.*

Our very capacity for love and relationships and intimacy with each other is modeled on the Trinity and in the image of the Trinity.

### ***Authority and Submission.***

The Trinity also shows us how to live with each other, how to be in relationship with each other.

It shows how we can be equal yet have different roles in the world and at home and at church. The Father and the Son are absolutely equal in essence, there's not even a hint of superiority or inferiority between them. The Son is in no way less than the Father.

Yet there's an order in the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son comes to earth and submits to the will of the Father. The Father and the Son send the Spirit who speaks according to the will of the Father and glorifies the Son.

The Trinity shows us how there can be authority and submission, leadership and following. Authority and submission are both God-like. Human relationships reflect this nature of God.

When red lights are flashing behind me I pull over. When April 15<sup>th</sup> rolls around I fill out some paperwork. When my coach told me to run to the 50 yard line and back after a grueling two hour practice, I kept my mouth shut. When the teacher gives an assignment the student does it. When the sergeant gives an order the private does it even if it's ridiculous. When the doctor

says we need surgery we do it. When parents say be home by midnight we should be home by midnight.

Egalitarianism is a post-modern illusion. It doesn't work, it's not practical, it doesn't reflect the creator God or the way His creation works. Without order, without leaders and followers, without those in authority and those under authority our world and our relationships would be chaos.

Church leaders and church members, husbands and wives, all equal and different, with different God-given responsibilities. The idea that submission or subordination demeans a person is absurd in the Trinity and on earth. Everyone one of us is in authority over someone and every one of us has someone in authority over us and we are equally human.

It's true sin has messed up all our relationships and filled them with endless possibilities for abuse and neglect. But because of our Christian understanding of the Trinity we have a model and example for bringing hope and help into our relationships. If those in authority and leadership acted more like the Father and those under authority acted more like the Son what a difference it would make.

Godly leadership is a beautiful gift and godly humility and submission is a beautiful gift.

What we have done here this morning in ordaining and installing some men to be our spiritual leaders is a reflection of the pattern of the relationship in the Trinity. Every relationship we have is either a good reflection of the Trinity or a poor reflection of the Trinity.

If we grumble and complain and nitpick and have critical spirits about the relationships God has given us then we are doing something poorly. You don't hear that kind of talk by the Son behind the Father's back or by the Holy Spirit about the other two.

Let's take our understanding of the Trinity home with us and to work with us and consider how God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are reflected in our own attitudes and actions.

You know how when you buy a new car, all of a sudden you start seeing that same make and model everywhere. They were always there but now you notice it. Same is true of the Trinity once you are aware of it.

Everywhere you see unity and diversity, everywhere you see authority and submission, equal but different responsibilities, everywhere you see love and relationships, you are seeing the reflection of God in our world and in our lives. And let that be cause for gratitude and worship.

**Prayer:** Glorious God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We bless you and praise you that you have revealed to us your glory in the indescribable Trinity. Father, saturate our souls with the Spirit of Christ and enlarge our capacity to receive the full measure of your revelation of yourself and to live our lives as a faithful reflection of your image in us. Come Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. Amen.