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Sermon

The Trinity expressed in the Athanasius Creed **Genesis 1:1-5, 24-31; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20**

11/6/2017

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Today is Trinity Sunday, which has been set aside to help us (maybe force us) to consider this Christian understanding of God.

When we read through the Bible, we find repeatedly an issue arises of who Jesus of Nazareth is in relationship to God the Father. What is the connection between the Spirit of God and the God whom Jesus calls Father? As one reads the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus claims to be God. In the Epistles, this belief is clearly stated. Very early on, the early Church started to use language which grouped God or Father, Jesus or Son and the Holy Spirit.

Our readings today give us three instances to consider. The epistle dates from around 55AD. In it, Paul refers to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the conclusion of his letter. For Paul, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, to associate Jesus of Nazareth, the Spirit of God and God together with such equality is extraordinary. He would never have done it before his conversion.

Even more surprisingly, he presents the names in the order, "Jesus, God, Holy Spirit." If he regarded Jesus as less than God, he would never put his name before God's in a grouping.

The Gospel of Matthew was written around the same time. It more clearly refers to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. More than just as reference, we are baptised in the (singular) name of Father, Son & the Holy Spirit. Some say these words were added later. But, there are other clues to the Trinity in Matthew's gospel, such as the Spirit descending on Jesus after his baptism while the voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."¹ Here, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are seen acting separately in the same event.

There are insights from the Old Testament as well. In the creation account, there is reference to the both God and the Spirit of God. Surely, it is reasonable to see not a proof but a hint of Father and Spirit at work in the creation. This is the view of the Church Fathers, who were far closer to direct contact with the Apostles than we are.

¹ Mt 3:16-17

One of the main words for 'God' in the Old Testament is Elohim. It is plural and derives from 'high ones.' It is used over 2000 times. Yet it is consistently used for the One God. This is the word for God throughout Genesis 1.

In verse 26, God speaks of himself in the plural, "Let **us** make man in **our** image and in **our** likeness." People are quick to claim this is a royal "we" but in fact that idea of royalty speaking of themselves in the plural did not exist until after the Old Testament was finalised. The other idea to explain this away is that it was a decision of God and the angels. However, there is no suggestion of the angels creating with God nor another example of God using a plural to include angels in his decisions. The third explanation is that the three persons of the Trinity were involved in creating mankind. Again this view is strongly supported by the early Fathers writing in the second and third centuries.

As people gave more thought to how they should understand Jesus being God and the Father being God and the Holy Spirit being God, they drew certain conclusions which still hold true. These seven statements define the concept of the Trinity. They are not hard to understand. First of all:

- 1. The Father is God;**
- 2. the Son is God;**
- 3. the Holy Spirit is God.**

You can understand that. We could go through scriptures to show why we believe those three statements but given the time constraints, we shan't.

Now you can see that one could argue that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are just three names for the same thing. The next statements rule that idea out:

- 4. The Father is not the Son**
- 5. The Son is not the Holy Spirit**
- 6. The Holy Spirit is not the Father.**

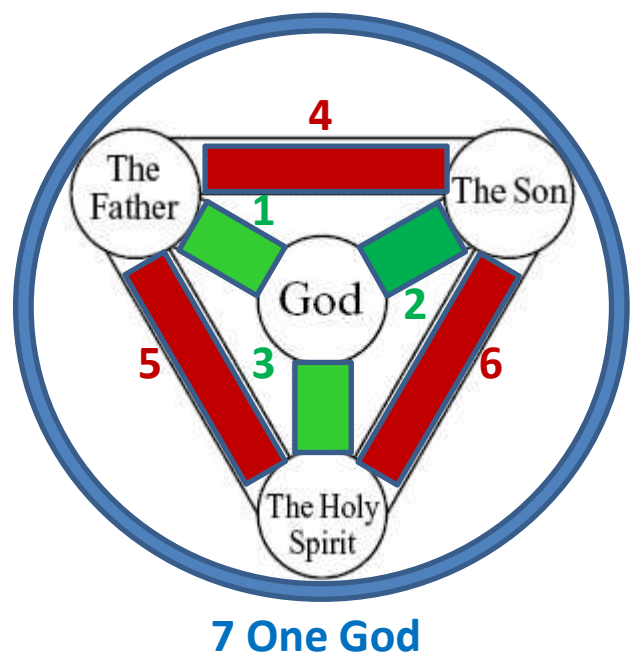
You can easily resolve that by saying there are three gods, however, the Old Testament thunders that:

- 7. There is only one God.**

and the New Testament agrees.

That is the absolute bare bones of the understanding. God is three yet God is one. It is simply a matter of observing and taking seriously what scripture says.

Traditionally, the Anglican Church has required the Athanasius Creed to be used on Trinity Sunday. I thought today we would use it and I would comment on it. The Creed is named after Bishop Athanasius who became Patriarch of Alexandria in 328. He was the great advocate of the teaching that Christ "is of one being with the Father." He held to this belief against those led by Arius who believed Jesus was a lesser being than the Father. Athanasius defended the orthodox position which is the basis of our understanding of the nature of Christ and of the Trinity. This struggle was both doctrinal and political. He was exiled five times by four different Roman Emperors for his beliefs being a total of 17 years in exile. In addition, he had to flee for his life on another 6 occasions from those wanting to kill him. Such was the opposition he endured that he was nicknamed, *Athanasius Contra Mundum* – (against the world). In the end he led the wider church back to the orthodox position that Jesus is truly God equal with the Father.



It seems that he did not write the creed which is named after him. It arose about 100 years after he died but it is firmly in line with his theology and in part directly quotes from his writing.

Athanasius' CREED	Comment
WHOSOEVER would be saved : needeth before all things to hold fast the Catholick Faith.	Catholic in the sense of universal not "Roman Catholic".
Which Faith except a man keep whole and undefiled : without doubt he will perish eternally.	Trinitarian belief is essentially Christian. My college principal commented that the one essential for any possible unity with another church group is Trinitarian belief.
Now the Catholick Faith is this : that we worship one God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity;	The essential statement.: 7
Neither confusing the Persons : nor dividing the substance.	Principles 4,5,6;7
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son : another of the Holy Ghost;	1,2,3
But the Godhead of the Father, and 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.	7
The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated : the Holy Ghost uncreated;	1,2,3 (uncreated)
The Father infinite, the Son infinite : the Holy Ghost infinite;	1,2,3 (infinite)
The Father eternal, the Son eternal : the Holy Ghost eternal.	1,2,3 (eternal)
And yet there are not three eternal : but one eternal	7 (eternal)
As also there are not three uncreated, nor three infinites : but one infinite, and one uncreated.	7 (uncreated; infinite)
So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty : the Holy Ghost almighty; And yet there are not three almighties : but one almighty.	1,2,3;7 (almighty)
So the Father is God, the Son God : the Holy Ghost God; And yet there are not three Gods : but one God.	1,2,3;7 (God)
So the Father is Lord, the Son Lord : the Holy Ghost Lord; And yet there are not three Lords : but one Lord.	1,2,3; 7 (Lord)
For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity : to confess each Person by himself to be both God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the Catholick religion : to speak of three Gods or three Lords.	1,2,3; 7 (God and Lord)

The Father is made of none : nor created, nor begotten.	1 (not made/created/begotten)
The Son is of the Father alone : not made, nor created, but begotten.	2,4 (not made/created but begotten)
The Holy Ghost is of the Father and the Son : not made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.	3,5,6 (not made/created/begotten but proceeding)
There is therefore one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons : one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.	1,2,3,7
And in this Trinity there is no before or after : no greater or less; But all three Persons are co-eternal together : and co-equal.	7
So that in all ways, as is aforesaid : both the Trinity is to be worshipped in Unity, and the Unity in Trinity.	Q.E.D.
He therefore that would be saved let him thus think of the Trinity.	

So there is the understanding. The creed is dealing with the results of much debate about the nature of the Trinity. What may seem to be pedantic repetition is, I think, dealing with the various ways people had gone astray in their theology. When we try to make sense of the nature of God, we are dealing with mystery and partial revelation. Often in the historic creeds, what is set forth is some explanation together with some boundaries which say, “You are safe inside these understandings, but we know these significant problems which lead to harm so don’t go there.” It is rather like setting the boundary lines for a soccer field and saying kick the ball inside these lines and don’t do certain things and you will be playing soccer.

The parameters which the creeds set are the result of careful thought about the revelation we have been given in scripture about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. As I said just now, there is still mystery – how could it be otherwise? If I could understand everything about God, I would have to be God.

We don’t need to be troubled by mystery. We can’t understand many far less profound matters than this! I studied electrical engineering but we have only a vague idea of what electricity really is. We can describe it in terms of electrons; we can measure it and state rules for how it behaves. But that is not the same as really understanding what it is. Jon Henderson told me the story of Lord Kelvin the great physicist who was teaching a university class and asked who knew what electricity was. A student impetuously raised his hand but then faltered saying he had forgotten. Lord Kelvin exclaimed, “Gentlemen, this is a tragedy. The only man in the world who knew and he has forgotten!”

I am not suggesting the nature of electricity is as profound as the nature of the God, but it illustrates that we can work with what we do understand and wonder at what is beyond us.

Relationship

An important understanding we can draw from the Trinity, is that since God is three persons of the same essence in perfect harmony then relationship is at the very centre of God’s nature and indeed of all creation.

So it is entirely consistent that the Bible says, “God is love.”² It is hard to see how the Trinity could coexist eternally if love were not paramount. It is also hard to see how otherwise God could be love before creation when there was nothing else to love.

We see that worked out in Paul’s words, we call the Grace: the grace, the love and the fellowship flow from members of the Trinity and that they are all terms of relationship.

“Grace” means kindness, undeserved, unearned favour. It is about how he relates to us. It is positive but not depending on our earning it. Love is the *agape* love of 1 Cor 13. Again it is unconditional. It takes the initiative and endures suffering for the beloved.

And then there is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. One of my dictionaries defines fellowship in this context as: *The share which one has in anything, participation.*³ The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the share we have in the Holy Spirit – it is his giving of himself to us his people as he dwells in and with us.

That’s what we celebrated last week at Pentecost - the gift of the Spirit. He is a gift of love; he is a gift intended to bring us into relationship with God, whose very nature is love.

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² 1 John 4:8 & 16

³ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon