

## **THE COMMUNITY OF GOD**

Matthew 28:18-20

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May 30, 2010

### **SCRIPTURE**

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. {19} Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20 NRSV).

### **INTRODUCTION**

Trying to explain the nature of God to any age group is challenging at best. Nick Boeke shares this story:

Talking to my children about God and the Trinity I asked them a trick question. "Of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which of them is God?" Natalie, my four-year-old girl, answered, "The tallest one."

### **I. THE COMMUNITY OF GOD**

The idea that there is one God and within the one God there are three persons is a profound mystery. The word we use to refer to this is the word "Trinity." The word "Trinity" is not found in Scripture. It is our name for the teaching that is found in Scripture. There is one God and within God are three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is a statement not an explanation. The Trinity is a mystery.

Of course, there are many other things in life for which we have no explanation. Examples would include: Why isn't "phonetic" spelled the way it sounds? Why are there interstate highways in Hawaii? If nothing ever sticks to Teflon, how do they make Teflon stick to the pan? So the concept of the Trinity is not the only mystery of life.

Now there are people who reject the idea of Trinity. They say things like, "I believe in God but this talk of Trinity is way too complicated and confusing! We don't need it." Now I agree it is complicated but it is unnecessary only if it is not the truth. Besides, who in their right mind would make this up? C. S. Lewis put it this way:

"If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with Fact. Of

course anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about.”

There are two mistakes we must avoid. One is to say that Trinity means three gods. The Bible is quite clear there is only one God. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4 NIV). The other mistake is to say that there are no distinctions within God, that “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” are just different ways of saying the same thing. I recommend that you read what Jesus said to his followers about the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:13-15) in order to appreciate that Trinity has to do with three persons and not three synonyms.

Perhaps another way to go about this is to say that the Bible teaches us that God is community. The metaphor may be shocking, but it is thoroughly Christian and can have a profound effect on our lives. If God is community then he has never been lonely, never been needy, is completely sufficient within himself. In short, God is more awesome, more powerful, more glorious, more blessed than we can imagine.

Many years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled, *Your God Is Too Small*. The book was a resounding challenge to seek a deeper understanding of the nature and character of God.

“At best,” he concludes, “many seem to think of God as nothing more than a greater man; an angry judge; a soft and kindly grandfather; or a scientist who invented the universe, wound it up and walked away from it, unconcerned as it operated on its own.”

The premise of the book is still valid today - we tend to make God rather small. Identifying with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit can change that way of thinking.

God is community. He did not make us out of necessity or compulsion but out of love. And when God made us he said:

"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27 NRSV).

Hal Miller comments on this by asking, “What is it to bear God's image? It is to be male and female, two and yet one, plural and yet single, to be individual in community.”

God is community and we bear God's image. Therefore community is an essential part of our relationship to God. This is why baptism apart from the church community is virtually meaningless. It is like asking a football coach to put you on his team and then

telling him you will not show up for practice and never come to any games. To be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to identify with the community of faith which affirms the community of God.

## **II. THE WORTHINESS OF GOD**

The teaching on the Trinity did not come to us from some ivory tower of theologians. It came out of the personal experience of the first followers of Jesus. Like many of us, they already knew about God in a vague way. Then came a man who claimed to be God; and yet it was clear that he was neither crazy nor a deceiver and so they trusted him. They saw him again after he had been killed. And then, after they had been formed into a little community, they found God was inside them as well: guiding them and enabling them to do things they could not do before. And when they worked it all they realized that the God they had experienced possessed a three-personal nature.

Later in history other Christians came to the conclusion that it could not have been otherwise. They believed that God created the human race out of love and compassion and intended for human beings to live in joyful harmony with God and each other. But the sinful rebellion of humanity fractured that harmony and so a radical step had to be taken in order to restore it.

God's justice and the severity of human sin demands that satisfaction be made for it. Since it is the human race that sinned against God, a member of that race must offer satisfaction to God. But no human being can do this because all have sinned against God. God, however, is capable of making such an offering. A Christian scholar from long ago by the name of Anselm described the problem this way, "None but true God can make it, and none but true man owes it."

The solution is found in what we call the incarnation - Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Because Jesus Christ is truly human he is the completely satisfactory means by which we are restored to our Creator. However, if Jesus had been only human and yet died on the cross to accomplish our salvation then you would have a situation where the human race would be forever in debt to, and forever owe allegiance to a creature, a mere man who was not God - an intolerable state of affairs. But because Jesus Christ is also truly God he is worthy of our praise and there is no conflict in our allegiance.

In a loud voice they sang: "'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!'" (Rev 5:12 NIV).

To identify with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to affirm how perfectly suitable it is to praise Jesus Christ and submit our lives to him.

### **III. THE PASSION OF GOD**

As Christians we believe “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). But how can one God, who is perfect, lacking nothing in himself and possessed of no dependence on creatures, be love when love necessitates a relation to another? God himself has revealed the answer to us: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father, Son, and Spirit exist from all eternity. From all eternity the Father has loved the Son. From all eternity the Son has loved the Father. And the love between the Father and the Son is so perfect that it too is a person: the Holy Spirit (cf. Augustine on the “Trinity”).

In order to better appreciate this let us consider an alternative. In contrast to the Trinitarian vision, a man called Mohammed arose to insist that God (whom he called Allah) was One, and the Christians were terribly wrong. Jesus was indeed a great prophet, but God's unity could not be violated by saying anything like "Jesus is God." The result, for Islam, was a vision of God in which justice and not love was the central theme. Hal Miller observes:

“A moment's reflection shows why this is so. How can love be central to God if God is One, literally, pure and simple? Whom did God love before the creation of the world? If God is one, the answer must be, "Nobody." But that means love is contingent and peripheral, not essential, to who God is.”

The instructor from a dog training workshop in Salt Lake City noted that a dog's disposition can be tested by the owner. If the owner will fall down and pretend to be hurt, a dog with a bad temper will tend to bite him. But a good dog will show concern and may lick the fallen owner's face. Susan Matice attended the class and then decided to test her two dogs. While eating pizza in her living room, she stood up, clutched her heart, screamed and fell to the floor. Her two dogs looked at her, looked at each other, then raced to the coffee table for her pizza! (Associated Press). Not exactly a compassionate gesture!

The Scriptures lead us to believe that for all eternity God has been, is now and ever shall be a community of love. This is good news for us because it means that God deals with the creation lovingly, even to the point of dying on its behalf.

To identify with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to believe God is love. We love because God is love, and knowing God impels us to love one another.

### **CONCLUSION**

The concept of the Trinity does not fully explain the character of God. The Trinity remains a mystery. So the goal here is not to comprehend God, for that is impossible.

Rather, the goal here is to experience God as he really is. This is not done through speculation, but through experiencing the act of grace through personal faith. You do not have to understand the Trinity before you can have faith in God. That can begin at any time - this morning, if you like!

I appreciate the way C. S. Lewis describes it:

“What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kind of life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself.”

May it be so for us, as well.