



THE COMPASS

RED HILL LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sermon Series: "We/I Believe." The Nicene Creed
(Pentecost, 2025)
"The Trinity."

□ **Day #1—Monday, November 3rd. Read: Matthew 28.16-20. —Encounter: God's Word and your life—What do you Hear and/or See?**

Thus far, in our sermon series, "I Believe: The Nicene Creed," we have explored the foundation of our beliefs: the Bible; the character and attributes of God the Father; and the person and power of Jesus Christ. Last week, we began the third article of the creed, confessing belief in the Holy Spirit. We confess that the Holy Spirit is *the Lord, the giver of life*. Consequently, we are saying that the Holy Spirit is God! Here we arrive at one of the central dogmas of Christian theology: The doctrine of "The Trinity." The Trinity explicates the truth that the One, true God subsists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, we read this description of the Holy Trinity:

Though the word "Trinity," first used in its Greek form *τριάς* [*trias*] by Theophilus of Antioch (c. AD 180), is not found in Scripture, Christian theologians have seen adumbrations of the doctrine in the biblical narratives; in the OT, for example, the appearance of the three men to Abraham (Gen. 18) was held by the Fathers to foreshadow the revelation of the threefold nature of God. In the NT the most influential text was the reference to the three Persons in the baptismal formula at the end of Mt. (28:19), but there are other passages held to have Trinitarian overtones, such as the Pauline benediction of 2 Cor. 13:14. From the biblical language concerning Father, Son (or Logos), and Spirit, Trinitarian doctrine developed, as the Church's expansion led to the need for reflection, confession, and dialogue.¹

The Trinity is first and foremost a profound mystery. Christian theology has retained this understanding of the godhead chiefly because this is Scripture's revelation about God! The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to explicate the divine *transcendence* (God is wholly other and above His creatures and creation), and God's *immanence* (God is love and desires to be a part of and with His creation and creatures)! According to Lutheran theologian, Ted Peters (my theology professor in seminary☺):

Theologically, however, we must say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three distinct, divine, rational beings, three subjects, or three separate selves...There are not three personalities in God, although we certainly might speak of a personality of God. The one God is fully present and active in each and all modes of being and action...²

Question/Reflect: "Jesus gives us the tools to make disciples: Baptism and His teaching...[The Church is to] ...baptize... them in the name. "Name" is singular, followed by the threefold naming of the divine persons. This illustrates the doctrine of the Holy Trinity....Those baptized in the name of the Father have God as their Father; baptized in the name of the Son, they receive all the benefits of the Son's redeeming act; baptized in the name of the Spirit, they receive the life-giving, life-sustaining power and presence of the Spirit. Christian Baptism is founded on this institution."³

□ **Day #2—Tuesday, November 4th. Read: Romans 11.33-36. —Examine: The Text and its Context.**

Today, we hear from Martin Luther in one of his sermons for the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. Using Romans 11.33-36 as his preaching text, Luther comments:

This festival requires us to instruct the people in the dogma of the Holy Trinity, and to strengthen both memory and faith concerning it. This is the reason why we take up the subject once more. Without proper instruction and a sound foundation in this regard, other dogmas cannot be rightly and successfully treated....Thus all the other festivals present the Lord in the guise of a worker of one thing or another. But this Trinity Festival discloses him to us as he is in himself. Here we see him apart from whatever guise assumed, from whatever work done, solely in his divine essence. We must

1 F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, Eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 Ted Peters. *God: The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

3 *The Lutheran Study Bible* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009).

go beyond and above all reason, leaving behind the evidence of created things, and hear only God's own testimony concerning himself and his inner essence; otherwise we shall remain unenlightened.⁴

Luther's insistence is that, while for humankind, the doctrine of the Trinity might be confusing, this limited, human understanding only points to God's inestimable ways and divine being. In other words, how can mere human beings understand completely a holy, supernatural being that transcends our minds? As one commentator put it rather simply, this would be similar to "an ant understanding quantum physics." Or, better said by Luther:

Upon this subject [the Trinity] the foolishness of God and the wisdom of the world conflict. God's declaration that he is one God in three distinct persons, the world looks upon as wholly unreasonable and foolish; and the followers of mere reason, when they hear it, regard every one that teaches or believes it as no more than a fool. Therefore this article has been assailed continually, from the times of the apostles and the fathers down to the present day, as history testifies...O shameless reason! How can we poor, miserable mortals grasp this mystery of the Trinity?...Is it not supreme blindness for man, when he is unable to explain the most insignificant physical operation daily witnessed in his own body, to presume to understand something above and beyond the power of reason to comprehend, something whereof only God can speak, and to rashly affirm that Christ is not God?⁵

Question/Reflect: "In ways beyond our understanding, God has acted in mercy to bring salvation to Jews and Gentiles. Human beings cannot exchange roles with God, presuming to sit in judgment of Him. But we in whom His Spirit dwells praise Him for His inexhaustible kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [Pray]: To You alone, O triune Lord, belongs all glory forever. Amen."⁶

□ Day #3—Wednesday, November 5th. Read: Mark 1.9-11. —Explore: The background to this text(s).

As has already been discussed, while the word *Trinity*, does not appear in the Bible, the understanding and doctrine of the Triune God is found throughout the biblical writings. Biblical scholar C. Meeks describes three, Biblical affirmations that informs the doctrine of the Trinity:

(1). There is only one God (Deut 6:4; Isa 43:10; 46:9; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4; Jas 2:19). (2). The one whom Jesus called "Father" (John 6:27; 1 Cor 8:6), the incarnate Son (Matt 1:23; John 1:1; Rom 9:5; Col 2:9; Titus 2:13–14; Heb 1:1–3), and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3–4; 28:25–27; 2 Cor 3:7–18) all possess the necessary attributes of this God. (3). These three are not identical; they interact with one another and their identities are constituted with respect to one another (...2 Cor 13:14). They act distinctly but in concert with one another (Heb 1:2–3).⁷

One of the Scriptural foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity is found in the accounts of Jesus' baptism. In this moment, Jesus the Son is being baptized; the Spirit descends upon Him (in the form of a dove); and the Father speaks words of blessing over His Son. Another key text in the Gospels is the account of the Transfiguration. Again, as Meeks describes, in the Transfiguration of Jesus...

The Synoptic Gospels (and also 2 Pet 1:16–18) describe a miraculous revelation to three of Jesus' disciples: Peter, James the son of Zebedee, and John (Matt 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). Elijah and Moses appear and converse with Jesus, and Jesus is not only transfigured in glorious brilliance before the disciples, but a voice declares from heaven, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). The disciples do not fully understand the event, but Christians reading the accounts would perceive that Jesus is again directly and powerfully linked to God the Father.⁸

Question/Reflect: [At Jesus' baptism] "The Father declares Jesus is His Son as the Spirit descends on Jesus. Jesus' status as God's Son makes Him a target of Satan's assaults (1:12–13). This same dynamic continues in the lives of God's children today, as Satan does all that he can to tempt the baptized. Yet, our own Baptism joins us to Christ and clothes us with His righteousness. [Pray]: Lord, You humbly stood in our stead when baptized by John and thereby gave us a share in Your life, death, and resurrection. Let us therefore celebrate our place in God's family, obeying the Father, dwelling richly in the Spirit, and ever following You. Amen."⁹

4 Martin Luther. "Trinity Sunday (Romans 11:33–36)." In J. N. Lenker, *Luther's Epistle Sermons: Trinity Sunday to Advent* (Minneapolis: The Luther Press, 1909).
5 Ibid.
6 *The Lutheran Study Bible*.
7 C. Meeks. "Trinity." In, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
8 Ibid.
9 *The Lutheran Study Bible*.

□ **Day #4--Thursday, November 6th. Read: Hebrews 1.1-4: Explore: The background to this text(s).**

We have repeatedly said that the *presence* of the Trinity is found throughout the Scriptural narrative. Here are some further examples:

John 16:13–15 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you....

John 17:21–24 ...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me...

1 Corinthians 8:6 ...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It was from these texts, as well as many others, that the early church needed to develop and articulate the doctrine of the Trinity for the sake of Christian theology and good order.

The doctrine of the Trinity was increasingly systematized in the post-New Testament era, as certain teachings that were not consistent with the apostolic faith increased in popularity. From AD 325–787, seven ecumenical councils were called to deliberate aspects of at least one member of the Trinity. Although most discussion focused on the person of Christ (e.g., the relationship between His humanity and divinity), it inherently involved the Church's attempt to understand God's revelation of His Triune self.¹⁰

As we have discussed through this series, in the early years of the church, various understandings about the person of Jesus, as well as His relationship to God the Father and the Spirit, were being taught, some of which were not consistent with the Biblical witness. The early church leaders and Fathers found it necessary to convene Ecumenical Councils, such as the council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. that would ultimately mediate and establish *orthodox* (literally, “right-words,” “right-teaching”), Christian doctrine for the purpose of the church's witness and life together.

Participants in the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 developed a creed that reflected the orthodox views of the Church regarding the revelation of God the Trinity as ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*, “of one substance”). The First Council of Constantinople in AD 381 would later expand the creed to its most lasting form, which is still used in worship today. The three main articles of the creed assert belief in one God, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and describe how these three persons are related. Even this creed would not prove universal for the Church, however, as East and West eventually divided partly over the issue of the Spirit's procession: The West held that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), a statement that was added to the creed at the anti-Arian Council of Toledo in 589 but was not present in the original Greek text.¹¹

Question/Reflect: “Jesus, through whom the Father created all things, and by whose Word all things are sustained, clearly reveals the gracious will of the Father to us. Although Jesus is heavenly like the angels, He is no mere creature. He is the firstborn Son of the Father, who shares with us all that the Father has. He frees us to receive God's ministry, including the ministry given through the angels. [Pray]: Lord Jesus, thank You for creating and sustaining me. By Your Word, keep me in true faith, that I may inherit salvation. Amen.”¹²

□ **Day #5— Friday, November 7th. Read: John 14.26; John 15.26. —Explore: The background to this text(s).**

As was mentioned in yesterday's study, in the Nicene Creed, we confess that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father and the Son*. The word that articulates this belief is, “*Filioque*.” The word comes from the Latin meaning, “and son.” Known in church history as the “*filioque clause*,” this word ultimately divided the eastern and western churches. Citing texts such as *John 14 and 15* above (as well as *John 14.16* and *Philippians 1.19*), the Church Fathers taught that the Spirit is sent by both the Father *and the Son*.

Similar to the *eternal begetting* of the Son from the Father, the “*filioque clause*” explicates the *eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son*. In other words, there was never a time when the Spirit was not! The *filioque* clause specifies...

¹⁰ Meeks, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Lutheran Study Bible*.

...the Trinitarian relationship. Also known as the “double procession of the Holy Spirit,” the *filioque* is the interpretation of the Holy Spirit as proceeding from both God the Father and God the Son, the *filius*, in the Trinity. Augustine (354–430) articulated the procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son. The Western Church adopted the *filioque* clause as its official stance as articulated in both the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds. At the Third Council of Toledo in 589, an interpolation was made in the Nicene Creed with the phrase “and the Son” to affirm the belief and acceptance of the *filioque*. The Eastern Church objected to the *filioque* clause on ecclesiastical and theological grounds, reasoning that God is the sole source and cause of both the Son and the Spirit...The Western Church rejected that notion, and in 1014 Pope Benedict VIII (d. 1024) reinforced the decision of the Third Council of Toledo that the *filioque* was orthodox.¹³

In affirming the unity of the Trinity, we also affirm the work of the Trinity in the world: God *the Father* who has created us and all that exists; Jesus *the Son* who has saved us and all creation; and, the *Holy Spirit* who applies the work of the Son to our lives, sanctifying us until Jesus returns!

Question/Reflect: “Through His death and resurrection, Christ went to prepare a place for us in heaven, where we will dwell with God forever. The true God cannot be known apart from Jesus Christ. Because of Christ’s work, we can know the Father and enter His eternal presence. [Pray]: O risen Lord, with great anticipation I long for my home in heaven. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.”¹⁴

□ **Day #6-Saturday, November 8th Read: 2 Corinthians 13.14.—Embrace: God and His guiding you through His Word.**

If there is a practical, primary understanding in the doctrine of the Trinity, it is this—that *God is love!* God is a *community* of reciprocal giving and receiving love within His very being! The Triune God is the source of all that exists and keeps all things in existence. The Triune God is a *communion of Persons*. Consequently, we can believe that the world is not a random, series of events, but is *personal*.

What brought creation into being was not an impersonal force like Evolution or fate. What moves the world is the Father of Jesus, the Father who is like Jesus, and who moves the world by the Spirit of Jesus. As we end this week and our exploration of the Trinity, let us summarize and clarify our focus:

1. ***God is One.*** The God of the OT is the same God of the NT. His offer of salvation in the OT receives a fuller revelation in the NT in a way that is not different but more complete. The doctrine of the Trinity does not abandon the monotheistic faith of Israel.
2. ***God has three distinct ways of being in the redemptive event, yet He remains an undivided unity.*** That God the Father imparts Himself to mankind through Son and Spirit without ceasing to be Himself is at the very heart of the Christian faith. A compromise in either the absolute sameness of the Godhead or the true diversity reduces the reality of salvation.
3. ***The primary way of grasping the concept of the Trinity is through the threefold participation in salvation.*** The approach of the NT is not to discuss the essence of the Godhead, but the particular aspects of the revelatory event that includes the definitive presence of the Father in the person of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.
4. ***The doctrine of the Trinity is an absolute mystery.*** It is primarily known, not through speculation, but through experiencing the act of grace through personal faith.¹⁵

Question/Reflect: The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that the world (you) were created *by and for love*. How does this change your understanding of God, your relationship with God?

¹³ M. A. G. Haykin Ed. *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History* (Lexham Press, 2002).

¹⁴ *The Lutheran Study Bible*.

¹⁵ J.M. Henry. “Trinity.” In, *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003).