



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Lord's Day, June 11, 2017

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The Name
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."¹

You recognize it, don't you?

Among Baptists, these verses form one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament, probably second only to John 3:16.

We know it as the Great Commission, and we usually approach it from a mission standpoint. But I want us to look at it from a little different angle today . . .

Thinking about the Trinity

On the Christian calendar, today is Trinity Sunday, a time for Christians to think together more deeply in worship about how God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God existing at the same time as three persons.

Now some will object that you can't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. That's true. And you won't find the *doctrine* of the Trinity fully formulated in the Bible. But the *makings* of it are all over Scripture, especially in the New Testament! As Alister McGrath puts it, "The Scriptural witness to and Christian experience of God came first, and reflection on it came later."²

It was actually not until the fourth century that the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity was formulated. Throughout the third and fourth centuries, there were doctrinal debates about the nature of God, often at a very high intellectual level that would seem rather academic to many. But don't dismiss the importance of those debates.

By the end of the fourth century, the doctrine of the Trinity was established within mainstream Christianity, and it's been held as the foundational truth of classical Christianity in all its expressions, whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, ever since. The 1963 edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, which probably best expresses our congregation's understanding of the faith from a Baptist perspective, puts it this way:

There is one and only one living and true God The eternal God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.

Now we can't fully define or explain the Trinity; we can only describe it, because ultimately, it's a *mystery*. And while the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity isn't in the New Testament, our text this morning is one of those many passages where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or at least two of the three) are all present in some way.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

There's a very clear Trinitarian implication in this text, as well as a directly Trinitarian formula. But to understand the significance of both, we need to look briefly at the passage in its context and as a whole.

When Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to the women who came to the tomb, he told them to go tell his disciples to go to Galilee, and they would see him there. Before he was crucified, he had told them that after he was raised he would go ahead of them into Galilee (Matthew 26:32). So the remaining eleven disciples did as Jesus said, and went to the mountain where he had told them to go.

When they got there, they saw Jesus and worshiped him. In Judaism worship was strictly reserved *only* for God. Some of the disciples doubted, and this doubting may imply a certain hesitation to worship Jesus, since they knew the significance of what doing so would mean (28:16-17).

And then Jesus spoke to them. When he said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**" (28:18), this was a declaration of his absolute sovereignty over the universe. It was also a clear acknowledgement that this authority was given to him *by the Father*. Jesus stated it in a way that faithful Jews stated things to avoid using the divine personal Name of God given in the Old Testament (YHWH) because of their great reverence for the Name. (Scholars sometimes refer to this as the "divine passive.") But this declaration was the ground for the command to bring all the nations under his rule as his disciples, baptizing them in the threefold yet one "**name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**" and teaching them to observe everything he had commanded them (28:18-20).

When we view Jesus' promise to be with his disciples "**always, to the end of the age**" (28:20) alongside Paul's letters, Acts, and the upper room discourses in the Gospel according to John, it's clear that Jesus is present with the church through the Holy Spirit dwelling in individual disciples and in the church corporately (28:20).

So in this passage, we have Jesus making indirect but distinct reference to the Father and implying the presence of the Holy Spirit. The clear Trinitarian formula for baptism gathers up God's revelation of himself as one God (the Name—in the ancient world, "name" stood for the person it spoke of)—this one God who is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (28:19).

So in reality, Jesus' final commission laid the groundwork for understanding God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A revealed mystery

Now often when we think or talk about the Trinity, we sometimes start from the affirmation that God is One, and can't fathom how he can be Three if he is One. Or we start from the affirmation that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we can't comprehend how the Three can be One. We make the Trinity *a problem*.

Someone—I can't remember now who it was—has put it well in saying, "The Trinity is not a *problem* to be solved; it is a *mystery* to be embraced and celebrated!"

What Jesus said here, and the way that the church formulated its teaching based on this and other New Testament passages, teaches us this important truth, this mystery that we affirm on this Trinity Sunday: *God reveals himself as one God who exists and works as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

This truth sets us apart from other monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam and some cults and sects like the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others. While we hold firmly to the fact that there is only one God, we also affirm that he exists and works as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *all at the same time!* Think about that for a moment.

Classical orthodox Christian teaching makes several affirmations about the Trinity. Let me mention three of them.

First, *God reveals himself as one God.* There are no other gods beside him. From the perspective of the Old Testament, he is “the Name.”

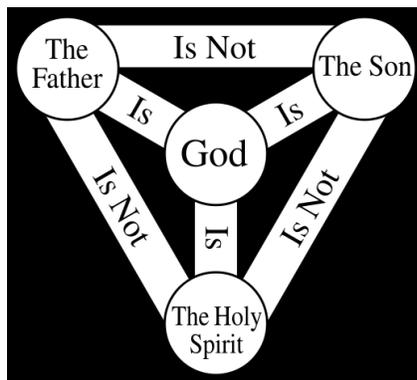
The definitive confession of the Old Testament is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5—

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

God alone has created us; he alone can redeem us; and to him alone we owe our absolute love, loyalty, and obedience. But this is only part of his revelation.

Second, *this one God exists and reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,* not consecutively (this was the ancient view called Modalism that was condemned as heresy), but *simultaneously*—all at the same time.

Thus Jesus, at his baptism, could see the heavens opened, hear the voice of the Father affirming him, and have the Spirit descend on him. He could pray to the Father and be empowered by the Spirit for his ministry. As the risen Lord, he can sit at the Father’s right hand, with him on the throne, yet be present in and among his people through the Spirit. He is truly One in Three, and Three in One. Within the Godhead, there is an amazing circle of relationships, a relational community, illustrated well by the Trinity Shield printed in our worship guide.



And it’s precisely because God is relational that he desires for us to be in a right relationship with him and has made that possible through what he has done in Christ!

That leads us to the third affirmation: *this one God works as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

Each was involved in *creation*—in Genesis 1, God spoke creation into being (the divine Word, which became flesh in the man Jesus), and his Spirit hovered over the waters. John, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews all describe the Son as the agent of creation.

Each person of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), is involved in *redemption*. The Father sent the Son, who conquered sin and Satan and worked salvation by his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. The Spirit applies this salvation through conviction and conversion.

And each is also involved in *providence*. Through the Spirit, Christ is present with us and guides us in all that we face, and the Father provides for us as he works out his great eternal purpose in us.

Now friends, I realize that I've just begun to scratch the surface on the magnificent mystery of the Trinity this morning. It reminds me of a story about Augustine, the great pastor and theologian of the early fifth century.

Not long after he had finished his great theological work that he titled *On the Trinity*, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa. He came across a boy who kept filling a small bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand.

He asked the boy, "Why are you doing that?"

As serious as the boy could be, he replied, "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into this hole."

And Augustine said, "My dear boy, what an impossible thing to try to do! The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small."

Then as he continued his walk, it dawned on Augustine that his efforts to write on the Trinity were a lot like what that boy was trying to do: the subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!³

So I will leave it this morning with this simple expression of this incredibly profound truth: *God reveals himself as one God who exists and works as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*—the great Name in which we are baptized and live as disciples of Jesus, the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And what response does this truth call for from us?

To worship him. To be in a right relationship with him and with one another as his people. To make for him disciples of all the nations. To love him and live as he has commanded us.

And so to the one eternal God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be honor, glory, and dominion forever and ever! Amen!

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 116-117.

³ Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 101; www.preachingtoday.com/illustration/2008/may/4051908.html (last accessed 06-08-2017).