



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina  
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### **The Trinity: A Relational Reality** **Romans 8:12-17**

Today is Trinity Sunday on the Christian calendar. So it's appropriate that we think together today about the Trinity, the Christian teaching that the one God exists as and has revealed Himself to us in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now thinking about the Trinity is no small challenge!

There's a story about Augustine of Hippo, the great North African bishop and theologian in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Not long after he had finished writing his work entitled *On the Trinity*, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa. As he walked, he saw a young boy who kept filling a 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 he could be, the boy answered, "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into this hole."

Augustine chided him: "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 to walk along the shore, it dawned on him—that in his efforts to write about the Trinity he was much like that boy. The subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!<sup>1</sup>

And yet it's important that we think carefully and prayerfully about the Trinity, all the while realizing that it is a mystery that's beyond our full comprehension.

#### ***Our distinguishing doctrine***

You see, it's what we believe about the Trinity that really distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. We agree with our Jewish and Muslim friends that God is one, and that He is personal, not just some impersonal force out there. But they part ways with us when we insist that in Jesus Christ, God came to earth to save us from our sins through His death and resurrection, and that now God is with us through His Holy Spirit dwelling in us as individual believers and among us as His church.

Now some will object that you can't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. That's true. And neither can you find the doctrine of the Trinity fully formulated in the Bible. But the *makings* of it are all over it, 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."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 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 those

debates were crucial to Christianity, because it was out of them that the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was established within mainstream Christianity, and it's been held as the foundational truth of classic Christianity in all its expressions, whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, ever since.

This doctrine teaches us that God is one yet exists and has revealed Himself as three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each sharing in the essence of the one God. As one writer has put it:

These Persons are distinct, but not separate, and are not three gods. They are One God because They are one in essence or nature. The Father is the unbegotten Fountainhead of Deity. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father (Jn 1:18; 3:16; 16:28). The Holy Spirit is the Helper (Jn 14:16) and Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 16:13), Who proceeds from the Father (Jn 15:26).<sup>3</sup>

In other words:

- The Father is God, but the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit.
- The Son is God, but the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is God, but the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

That doesn't explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity; but it does emphasize for us the relationships within the Trinity.

Maybe an analogy can be helpful here. Prior to our moving here to Wilmington to serve Temple Baptist Church, Jo Ann and I spent four years in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was pastor of the Smithwood Baptist Church. During that time, we discovered that the state of Tennessee is a good analogy for the Trinity.

State statute divides Tennessee into three "Grand Divisions"—legally distinct regions—East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee. The state Supreme Court has a court house in each region, and is mandated to meet in each region at least once each year. Each Grand Division has equal legal standing, and each is Tennessee—sharing in the essence of Tennessee, you might say. But East Tennessee is *not* West Tennessee or Middle Tennessee, and vice versa—and the natives will let you know that! But all are Tennessee!

This reality is depicted on the state flag by a dark blue circle representing the state on a crimson field, with three white stars within the circle representing the three regions of the state and their unity—one state, three Divisions.

That's a good picture of the Trinity—one God in three Persons, all sharing the nature and essence of God, co-equal, co-eternal, yet distinct.

### ***The Trinity in Scripture***

Now as I said a moment ago, you won't find the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible. But the raw materials for it are everywhere. Our text this morning is one of many New Testament passages where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or at least two of the three) are all present.

Look at what Paul says here. His line of argument runs something like this. He's been describing how through Christ's coming and His death and resurrection, God has dealt with sin,

so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Those who belong to Christ have His Spirit dwelling in them, leading and empowering them to live according to God's ways rather than their own, in anticipation of sharing in Christ's glory in the resurrection (8:1-11).

As a result, we're under obligation, not to the flesh, but to God. If we live according to the flesh, we will die; but if by the Spirit we put to death the sinful deeds of the body, we will live. Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. The Spirit we have received is not **the spirit of bondage**, but **the Spirit of adoption**.<sup>4</sup> By this Spirit we cry, "**Abba, Father,**" as **the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God**. If we're His children, then we're His heirs—**heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ**, sharing in His suffering now and in His glory in the resurrection (8:12-17).

Now in the midst of this argument, Paul mentions the Holy Spirit, then the Father, then Christ the Son. What does he say about each one?

How does he describe the Spirit? He says that the Spirit leads the children of God. Notice that—leads, not drives. The Spirit we've received is *not* a **spirit of bondage** that causes us to fall back into fear; He is **the Spirit of adoption!**

In the ancient Mediterranean world, the Jews didn't practice legal adoption, but the Romans did. Now in that patriarchal cultural context, sons were more prized than daughters, and all the inheritance rights went to the sons. So it was almost always sons who were adopted. In fact, the Greek word translated *adoption* quite literally means "to place as a son." So among the Romans, an adopted son—who might even be adopted as an adult—had all the rights, honors, privileges, and responsibilities of a son born into a family. He received the family name and shared fully in the family inheritance.

Paul uses this metaphor of a legal standing in the Roman world that was available only to sons, but applies it to *all* God's children, male and female, declaring that *all God's sons and daughters are His heirs*. He says that the Spirit we've received has brought about our adoption as sons of God, with all the rights, honors, privileges, and responsibilities that go with being members of God's family. That includes sharing in Christ's sufferings now, so that we may share in His glory in the resurrection! The Spirit bears witness in our hearts, that we are God's children. And by Him, **we cry out, "Abba, Father."**

That way of addressing God, "Abba," was a part of the early church's worship, going back to Jesus Himself. Abba is the Aramaic word for Father. But it's not the very formal "Father"; it's the touching, intimate word that a little child uses to address his or her father. Doesn't Paul say a lot about the Father with this? He's not some distant being, who's only our Father by creation, as most Jews would have held. He's our loving heavenly Father, who is intimately involved with His children, who knows us and cares for us, and wants a deep relationship with us as His children! He has adopted us and taken us completely into His family. He provides for us now, and He's made us His heirs for eternity!

And what about Christ, the Son of God? Through Him, God has dealt with our sin. Through Him, the righteousness of the law has been fulfilled in us, as we depend on Him and His faithfulness. Now, Paul says, we are fellow heirs with Him. Paul will go on to describe the Son in verse 29 as **the firstborn among many brethren** (His brothers and sisters). He is God's Son—as the early church fathers would put it, "begotten, not made." We are God's children by adoption. As God's adopted children, we'll share the eternal inheritance with the Son as we share in His resurrection and live with the Father forever!

### ***All about relationship***

Now looking at what Paul has said here, what's the common denominator of it all? What's it all about?

Isn't it relationship? *The Father, Son, and Spirit are in relationship with one another, and with us.* He is one God, who exists and has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through relationships—both *within* His own being, and *with us* as His creatures.

In other words, *the Trinity is a relational reality!* In His very essence, God is all about relationship!

Theologian Donald Bloesch has captured this well. He writes:

This God is first of all a Personal Spirit . . . . He not only exists but he also co-exists as a Trinity. He is capable of having fellowship with humanity because he has fellowship within himself. He is capable of caring because he embodies love within himself.

The God of the Bible is a living God, not a philosophical first principle or a moral ideal . . . . He is not divinity in the abstract, but a divine person . . . . He is a gregarious God, seeking to include man in fellowship with himself.<sup>5</sup>

Can you fathom that? The God who created the universe, who brought all things into being, who rules over all—this God who has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three-in-one and one-in-three—this God reaches out, inviting us into a relationship with Him!

We can't explain Him, but we can *experience* Him. We can't understand everything about Him, but we can *know* Him. We can't figure Him out, but we can *put our faith* in Him. And though as the Trinity, He is yet a mystery to us, it is through this mystery of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we are made right with God!

Augustine said, "If you can understand it, it's not God!"<sup>6</sup> Maybe what we need to do is not so much to try to figure out the Trinity as to celebrate our wonderful Triune God and to trust Him—our heavenly Father who has redeemed us through His Son and has adopted and dwells in us through His Spirit!

And for that we can say, Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 101; <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/may/4051908.html> (accessed 05/23/2018).

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

<sup>3</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

<sup>5</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), cited in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), 195.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, 9.