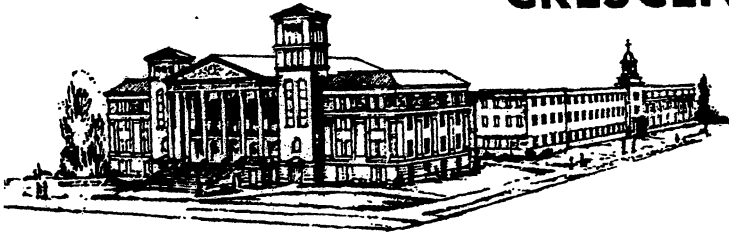


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH



SERMONS

"THE MEANING OF THE TRINITY"

Sunday Evening, June 25, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
John R. Claypool

Tonight marks "a first" in my preaching career. I have never tried in sermon form to deal with the complex subject of the triune nature of God. I have attempted this in the atmosphere of the classroom, but never in the context of worship or in the short time allotted a sermon. Yet I feel strongly led to do so for many reasons. The doctrine that God is one Being in three Persons is basic to the Christian faith. We follow this pattern in many of our worship practices. Yet it is gravely misunderstood. A little boy once asked his Sunday School teacher: "Is God a three-headed monster?" When the teacher recoiled in horror and asked where he got such an idea, the root of the matter proved to be the Trinity. Therefore, I think we need to consider it, although I admit from the start that it is exceedingly difficult. Centuries ago, in discussing the matter, one of the church fathers said: "If you try to deny it, you lose your soul; if you try to understand it, you lose your mind." We shall try to avoid both tonight as we look at this subject: What does it mean to say that God is one Being but consists of three Persons?

The first point I want to make will probably surprise you: the word "trinity" is not found in the Bible. It was not used until some one hundred and seventy-five years after Christ, and then by a little known apologist (Theophilus). And the Church did not formulate the doctrine until well in the fourth century after Christ. All that you find in the Bible are what I would call "the raw materials" of the doctrine. There are certain hints in the Scriptures toward this effect, and a certain line of development in that direction, but nothing explicit. For example, the earliest chapters of Genesis picture God in a multiple form. God said: "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Also the Spirit (Genesis 1:2), Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22-31), and Word of God (Isaiah 55:11) in the Old Testament have an almost personal existence all their own. And the Hebrews were quite familiar with the idea of "corporate personality" that depicted a oneness that included many parts. Then in the New Testament you have implicit reference to the three Persons of the Godhead. At the baptism scene the distinctions are clear: there is Jesus, the son; the voice from heaven, the Father; and the dove descending, the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17). In John's Gospel this is also implicit, when Jesus promises that the Father would send the Comforter to call to remembrance all that He has said (John 14:26). And, of course, in the baptismal formula of the Great Commission you have the explicit statement: "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Thus the ingredients are there, but the doctrine is never formulated in all its implication.

This raises a very logical question: if it is not in the Bible and was not formulated for four centuries, why should we bother with it? If the Church simply "voted in" a triune God in a bit of unwarranted metaphysical speculation, why not ignore the whole business anyway? This raises the question of the purpose back of the doctrine, and we would do well to consider this carefully.

The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to protect the validity of Christian revelation. The early Christians took their experience and tried to think out its implications. It was an inductive process through and through. They did not make this up "out of thin air," but simply reflected on the pattern of their own encounter with God. They had met Him in three ways: (1) as Jews they had known Him as the Creator and Provider, the Father; (2) in Jesus Christ they felt they had encountered the presence of God Himself; (3) after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came as another manifestation of God. In each case they were certain this was an authentic expression of God. Therefore they reasoned: "If we have truly met God, then how He has appeared must be how He exists in eternity." If they had really met "God-as-He-is," then a three-fold nature inevitably follows. It was to protect the authenticity of their experience that they came to this conclusion.

In the long years of thinking this out, the Church repeatedly rejected attempted solutions that undercut revelation. One man by the Sabellius set forth an intriguing solution. He took his lead from the practices of the ancient theater. Big masks or "modes" were used for different characters, and one actor might play many parts in the course of a drama. Sabellius said that God was one Actor who first put on the "mask" of Father, then Son, then Holy Spirit. It seemed to be a wonderful solution; it preserved both the "oneness" and the "threeness" of God. But it involved a subtle flaw: it denied real revelation. If these encounters were only "appearances" of God, then man still had not seen "God-as-He-is." He is a fourth Entity back of the masks, and is not known as He is in fact. Another attempt was made by a man named Arius. He pictured the Son as a "go-between" for God and man. He was a "third type," neither God nor man, and served as the intermediary for both. But this involves the same weakness: it denies true revelation. If the Son was only a lower version of divinity, the true Essence is still unknown.

All such efforts were debated and finally rejected, and in 325 the Church affirmed that God was in eternity what He had revealed Himself in time. He was "one in essence but three in person." God as He had come to man was God as He is.

This sets the lines along which the Church has thought ever since, but it did not remove all the difficulties. How could three possibly be one? It sounds preposterous, and has defied any rational explanation. The real difficulty centers in the concept of "oneness."

It should be noted that there are two kinds of "oneness." There is the arithmetic one, the single or solitary one. There is also a oneness that is a unity of many parts. I have "one" body, though it is composed of several parts. Now there is much to be said for the fact that "one" in relation to God is always in the latter sense. The Old Testament, for all of its emphasis on monotheism, infers multiplicity in the oneness of God. For God to be "one" does not mean that He is a solitary, arithmetic one; it means He is a living unity of three distinct personalities.

C. S. Lewis has offered a helpful illustration from the field of geometry. He points out that oneness in a certain dimension may involve many parts of a lower dimension. For example, in the realm of one dimension, a single line is one. Moving on to two dimensions, you have one square but four lines. In the three dimensional sphere, one cube includes six squares and twelve lines. Thus the higher you go, the unity includes a multiplicity of parts. So with God. Since He exists on a dimension beyond us, the unity that is His could include many personal parts. This does not "prove" the doctrine, but it at least rescues it from irrationality.

Neither do the many analogies explain the mystery; they simply show that such a possibility is not incredible. The example used most often is H₂O. It is one substance that exists in three distinct forms: as a solid, ice; as a liquid, water; as a gas, steam. Here is one essence in three forms. Another example is a tree; it is one substance, but has roots, trunk, and limbs. On and on I could go, not proving the doctrine, simply pointing to parallels in nature.

This, then, is the doctrine in a most summary fashion. I myself believe it for three definite reasons. The first I have already stated: it protects the reality of the Christian experience. It makes the simple induction that if we have really met God in this three-fold way, then He must be in Himself what He has revealed in time. Whatever you may think of the doctrine, realize that a momentous issue was at stake.

The second reason grows out of the nature of love. The only definition that the New Testament gives of the being of God is this three-word formula: "God is love" (I John 4:8). If you stop to consider this, it demands a multipersonal Being, for God could not be love in isolation. Love demands some personal response, and if this is an accurate description, then God must have some interpersonal fellowship within Himself. Apart from the historical revelation this reality confirms the doctrine.

The third reason may sound a little strange, and yet I believe it is significant. The fact that we cannot comprehend this Being confirms rather than denies its authenticity. Since God is on a higher level of being, I should not expect to understand Him fully. If I could completely grasp a concept of God, I would suspect its validity. This does not mean I accept any absurdity because it is beyond me. There are definite reasons for believing that God exists in this complex form. Therefore, I shall not let the fact that I cannot comprehend it block belief. That it remains an ineffable Mystery is but another mark of authentication.

I believe, then, in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Here is God-above-me, God-before-me, God-within-me. I believe He must be in eternity what He has revealed Himself in time. Difficult, complex, incomprehensible as it may be, this, I think, is the meaning of the Trinity.