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Holy Trinity Sunday Sermonettes

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First Lesson & Commentary

Let's be honest. Three sentences into the Athanasian Creed, our heads are already spinning, aren't they? What is all this talk about not mixing the persons or dividing the divine being? What is that even supposed to mean? And why be so repetitive, even maybe monotonous about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all being uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty, God, and Lord? Can't we make this a little more simple?

Believe me when I tell you that I feel for you. We speak the Athanasian Creed once a year in church, here on Trinity Sunday, and without question it's like diving straight into the deep end of the Theology pool. There's some terminology and some concepts that make your head hurt to try to grasp – and even then, can any of us ever actually, fully understand? Well, does your newborn child understand everything about what you do and what makes you who you are? Of course not, so how could think that we finite mortals who live for a number of decades at most could possibly ever get our minds around the infinite, immortal, eternal God?

We can't. So why did God even bother to tell us who he is, what he does, and what he's like, if we can't possibly understand? Well, it's because in our relationship with God, it's not about understanding and reason and rationality – it's about trust and intimacy. You can think about it like this. When you're at work or at some official, buttoned-up kind of function, you might meet people and have to refer to them by their title, as Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So or something like that. There's a distance in your relationship where you might have something to do with each other, but your relationship very definitely has strictly defined limits. But if you're on a first-name basis, you've got a special connection there, a special closeness and intimacy that not just anybody else does.

Well if it helps, maybe you can think the same way about God. He's not just some generally indefinable, impersonal, unknowable Big Guy in the Sky somewhere like some people think. He's not some elephant that we have to figure out by groping around him blindfolded, like an old parable says. No, he's told us exactly who he is in the Bible because he wants us to know him personally. He wants us to be on a first-name basis with him so that we can have that kind of family closeness and intimacy. He wants us to know him as our heavenly Father, the one who made us, provides for us, and takes care of us every day. He wants us to know him as the Son, our true Brother who took on our flesh to be one with us. He wants us to know him as the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Counselor, the one who is always at our side to

give us holiness and life, to keep us close to him in faith, and to guide us through this life as we walk the path to heaven.

See, those are truths that we need to know not just for the sake of keeping them in the old steel trap. This isn't just some mental exercise. No, those are truths that we need to know and confess because they are the difference between eternal life and eternal death, and the devil hasn't stopped working since the time of Christ to try to ruin that for us. Yes, this may seem deep and it may seem repetitive, but if that's what it takes to stand up for God's honor and not give an inch to anyone who wants to obscure it, then as God's people who are zealous for his truth in this world, that's what we'll do. We'll say boldly that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God, not because we can rationalize or understand it, but because that's what our God himself teaches us about himself in his holy, perfect Word. No, we don't mix the persons, as if there's actually only one God playing three different parts like an actor – like Harrison Ford playing Han Solo, Indiana Jones, and Jack Ryan. And we don't divide the divine being either, as if there's actually three separate Gods. Neither of those are right or true from God's Word. And we don't go down the road of trying to explain or simplify the Trinity by using pictures or analogies like a three-leaf clover, or like three phases of water, or like one person having body, soul, and spirit, or anything else, because all of those ideas fall short in one way or another of the towering Trinitarian truth that God tells us about himself in his Word.

Yes, maybe it would be nice in some ways to feel like we know more about God than we do. But for my part, I think it's so much nicer to know what we do and then with everything else, to just marvel at the greatness of his majesty – because the truth is, a God who fits between our ears isn't all that great. But a God who fills heaven and earth – that God can truly be our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. That God can truly be the one who – more than anyone else ever could – blesses us and saves us, like our first lesson says. That God can truly be *our* God who uses all that greatness for our good, and he is a God worthy of a confession as wide and long and high and deep as his love for us. So today let's proudly confess the Athanasian Creed – in-depth and repetitive though it may sometimes seem – because only with certainty about who our God is can we be absolutely certain about what he has done and what he still does every day for us and for our salvation.

Second Lesson & Commentary

The last section of the Creed confessed the most basic truth of Scripture: there is one true God who reveals himself as three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each equally almighty, all-knowing, all-present, eternal, and each fully worthy of the titles God and Lord.

But yet maybe we glossed over an important term we used there that really guides the section we just read: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, but yet each Person is *distinct*. How is that true? Well even though they all equally share the same characteristics when it comes to how they relate to us – eternal, almighty, all-knowing, and so on – they differ in their roles and relationship to one another. And here’s what that means.

Each Person of the Trinity has some special characteristic that applies only to that one person of the Trinity. First of all, you can tell just by the name that the Father is kind of like the leader, the captain of the team. He’s the one that’s often pictured sitting on heaven’s throne with all glory and power and majesty. He’s the one who wants us to think of him as what a true Father should be – someone who in the greatest of ways loves us, provides for us, takes care of us, protects us, disciplines us, and makes a home for us eternally. And he’s the one who set into motion the plan for our salvation by sending the Son and the Holy Spirit to do *their* work.

Now when we start to talk about the Son and the Holy Spirit, that’s when the Creed really starts to make its distinctions. The Son is neither made nor created, it says – he’s eternal God, remember? But what the Creed does say is that he is *begotten*. Now scholars have debated for centuries whether that’s the best way to translate this Biblical Greek term. What you maybe remember from the King James days about how “*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,*” I’m going to read in a few minutes as “*God... gave his one and only Son.*” But regardless of how we translate the term, what’s most important to know and remember here is that this isn’t meant to be a *physical* term describing a physical truth. It’s a *relational* term, describing how God the Father and God the Son relate to each other.

And what I mean by that is that the Father didn’t beget the Son like a human father begets a human son. They don’t have that kind of relationship, where one comes before the other, one causes the other to come into existence, one is greater than the other. No, the Son of God is called “only begotten” because his relationship with the Father is totally unique. See, by faith in Jesus Christ, we too are called true sons and daughters of God. But not like the “one and only” Son. He is the Son of God from eternity – who didn’t have to be adopted into the Father’s family like we do, but who has always been one with him. And he’s called the “one and only” Son because he humbled himself and came into this world to do the Father’s Will

just like an obedient Son does, and he was the “one and only” person who was able to live and die and rise again perfectly for us, just like it needed to be done in order to save us.

But before the “only begotten,” the “one and only” Son of God could finally make us his true brothers and sisters and true sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, first the Holy Spirit needed to do *his* special work. And what makes him distinct is not that he is made or created, either – he’s eternal God, too. And he’s not begotten like the Son is. No, the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son.

So what is that supposed to mean? What it means is that the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to do *his* work based on the work *they* had to do first. See, the Holy Spirit’s primary work is creating faith in Christ in people’s hearts, giving spiritual and eternal life through the power of God’s Word and Sacraments. Those are the tools he uses to work that faith and connect us to our Savior and all the spiritual blessings he won for us. But if the Father never sent the Son, what kind of faith could the Holy Spirit work? If the Son never lived and died and rose again as our perfect Savior, what kind of faith would there be for the Holy Spirit work? He couldn’t, there would be nothing! That kind of faith would be empty and futile and meaningless. If the Father and the Son had never done *their* work, the Holy Spirit could never do *his* work, either. But since the Father did complete his work of setting his plan of salvation into motion, since the Son did complete his work of winning that salvation for us, now the Holy Spirit can *proceed* to work real, solid, meaningful faith in Jesus in our hearts; he can grow and solidify that faith throughout our lives; and he can preserve us in that faith until we see our Triune God face-to-face in life everlasting.

Yes, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct from one another in their roles and their relationship to each other. But yet just as all those Persons are equally eternal, almighty, and worthy of our worship, so also all of those roles – different though they may be – are all equally important for us and equally dedicated to bringing us home to heaven one day. We need all of those roles, those works; we couldn’t be saved without any single one of them. So thank God we have a Father who planned our salvation, an only-begotten Son who won our salvation, and a Holy Spirit who proceeds to deliver our salvation to us now and forever.

Third Lesson & Commentary

Maybe more than anything else in the Creeds, these exclusive statements we read in the Athanasian Creed really kind of grind against us here in 2020 America, don't they? Three times the Creed says you must believe this or you cannot be saved. Whoever does not have this *conviction*, whoever does not *faithfully and firmly* believe this, whoever does not keep this faith pure *in all points* will *certainly* perish forever.

I mean, isn't that a little too harsh? Isn't that a little too strong? Why do we need to be that rigid and exclusive? And what is all this talk about answering for our personal deeds and getting into heaven if we've done good and being sent to hell if we've done evil?

I understand that all of that can be pretty shocking, especially in our current culture and climate where taking a solid stand on anything – especially anything Biblical – seems so abnormal. But make no mistake about it: that's exactly what this is. It is taking a solid stand on the most rock-solid thing we could ever possibly stand on: the truth of God's Word and the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

Now consider the alternative. See, part of the reason the Creed speaks so strongly is because it needed to meet the challenges of its day head on. In those days, a handful of false teachings in one way or another skewed the truth that God is Triune and that Jesus was true God and true Man in one Person – which on the surface might not seem like a big deal to some, but actually had huge ramifications that threatened to destroy our Christian faith. The fact is, if someone believes in something other than a Triune God, then they believe in a different God than the one who describes himself to us in the Bible. And the fact is, a Jesus who is not 100% fully God and at the same time 100% fully man cannot be our Savior. At best, that would make him our *example* to follow so we could try to win salvation for ourselves, which simply is not realistic for us. No, Jesus had to be true man so that he could live this life under the Law as our substitute, and so that he could die the death we deserved as our sacrifice. He had to be true God so that he could keep the Law *perfectly* for us throughout his life, because we never could; and so that his sacrificial death would be *valuable* enough to pay for the sins of the whole world and ransom us from slavery to death and the devil. Jesus had to be fully God and fully Man in one Person – not just one or the other, not some kind of 50% demigod mixture of the two, like the Creed says – because anything less than 100% of both God and Man could not have saved us. There was no wiggle room, and to take away Jesus as true Man and true God was to also take away Jesus as our Savior and leave us to find salvation from sin on our own – which is an impossibility for broken sinners like us. On our own, apart from Jesus, we can never do good and all we do is evil. But through faith in Jesus, our perfect Savior, all the evil we've done is forgiven and forgotten by our God and now all he sees is good in our hearts and lives. So don't worry, our eternal life is still all about Jesus.

But of course, it's not like any of these false teachings the Creed speaks against came with a full-frontal assault against Jesus. The devil is too smart to attack the truth that way. No, he likes to work in subtleties, in slick and catchy phrases, in playing to our reason and emotions, in using sloppy or sleepy language that we might not always catch. In fact, one of those false teachers I mentioned before, a man named Arius, built his argument that Jesus wasn't the eternal Son of God or equal to God the Father by changing just one little Greek letter. With just one little letter he changed the Greek word we translate that Jesus is “of one being” with the Father, to say rather that Jesus is “something like” (but actually less than) the Father. But no – Jesus himself said, “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:30) and “*All [should] honor the Son just as [Greek: as equal to!] they honor the Father*” (John 5:23). Again, if Jesus isn't fully true God and fully true Man, then we cannot be saved. Arius would have ruined and destroyed that! See, just as one little letter on the compass makes all the difference between North and South, so also even one little letter here can make all the difference for us between heaven and hell, if it changes what we believe about our God and Savior.

So why does this matter so much to us nowadays? Because this faith is just as true and essential nowadays as it was back then, and the devil is working just as hard nowadays as he was back then. Maybe we don't have religious groups who openly walk around calling themselves Arians anymore – but we do have Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, who follow in their footsteps. We might not have people changing one little Greek letter anymore, but we do still have lots of people who call into question whether we can actually trust the Biblical record, or who interpret the Bible only through the lens of modern science, or who change the definitions of things like love and truth to include what God would define as evil and immoral. No, the devil hasn't stopped attacking even to this day, so that means we can't stop confessing our faith and standing up for the truth – because nothing less than our eternal salvation is at stake.

Yes, this type of strong stance might seem out of place in today's world. But remember that we are not of this world, and this type of stance is still no less needed. So with Jesus, who said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6); with the Apostle Peter, who said about Jesus, “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12); with the Apostle Paul, who wrote our third lesson for today; with the writers of our Christian Creeds, and with our forefathers in the Reformation, let's stand solidly on the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Let's not allow it to be compromised in any way. And let's confess clearly and strongly the truth of God's Word, because then our God will have all the glory he deserves and we will have all the comfort and confidence and forgiveness that he truly wants for us.