

The Doctrine of the Trinity



Matthew 28:17 "And Jesus came and said to (the eleven disciples), '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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

It is a surprise to many Christians to discover that the Doctrine of the Trinity is not scripturally founded, but originated in the third and fourth centuries when Christians disagreed among themselves about the nature of Jesus and his relation to God the Father, and to the Holy Spirit. There were indeed diverse opinions widely held, exemplified by those various heresies that I preached about last year, like Montanism, Gnosticism, Arianism, and Docetism. Historians have come to

realize during the first three centuries of the Christian Church, the practices and beliefs found among people who called themselves Christian were so varied that the differences today between Roman Catholics, Primitive Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists pale by comparison. The subsequent agreements in the fourth century at Councils of Nicaea and then of Constantinople became the Doctrine of the Trinity as we know it today, and is now defined in the so-called Nicene Creed. And after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the Church became the official religion of the Empire and thus had the power then to expel and suppress any opposing opinions, thus creating what we now call 'orthodoxy'. Of course at the time, all those later so-called 'heretics' thought that they were 'orthodox' in their positions, and at that it was all the others who were mistaken in theirs and thus heretical.

Thus, we should not be surprised that this verse from Matthew's Gospel this morning, where Jesus instructs his followers to go make disciples of all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is, in fact, remarkably, the only **explicit** mention of the Trinity together in the whole of the New Testament. Yes, there are various other references to Jesus, or to God the Father, or to the Holy Spirit, but this verse is the only time they are all mentioned together, in a seemingly equal status.

But alas, this text is problematic. Though all our existing manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel have this text as we have here, there is no known copy of this verse dated earlier than the fourth century, and no early Church Father quotes this verse before the fourth century. And interestingly, the early Church historian Eusebius, at the beginning of the fourth century, quotes this verse some seventeen times in his expansive writings, and every single time he quotes it, he has Jesus saying instead, go instruct or baptize them "in my name," not mentioning the Trinity. And in fact, the Book of Acts (2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5, 22:16) repeatedly records that the first disciples did indeed baptize their converts in the name of Jesus, not in the name of the Trinity. The suspicion, therefore, is that this biblical verse was altered in later manuscripts, after the Trinitarian agreements of the fourth century, to reinforce the so-called 'orthodox' conclusions of those debates.

Similarly, though perhaps not surprisingly, there is only one possible **direct** reference to Jesus as God in the whole of the New Testament --- on that occasion when the doubting Thomas was confronted with the Risen Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Yet many biblical scholars understand this passage not as a theological declaration that Jesus was God, but simply a personal exclamation, just as we might say "Oh my God" when we come upon something unexpected. Moreover, there are several New Testament

passages that suggest a significant differentiation between Jesus and our Father in heaven. For example, in Mark's Gospel (10:17-8) when the rich man runs to Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (And) Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Or later in Mark's Gospel (13:32) when Jesus talks about heaven and earth passing away and says: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," despite the later doctrine of the Trinity declaring that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal.

In New Testament times, most people just saw Jesus as an inspired Jewish prophet. For the first hundred years or so of the Church's life, Christians argued with Jews about whether Jesus was really the long-awaited Messiah or not, and what that meant, and not about whether Jesus was God, a difficult belief for strongly monotheistic Jews. Deuteronomy 6 reads "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. . ." These verses from the Book of Deuteronomy are the beginning of the great Jewish confession of faith, called the Shema or the Shema Israel, which

has long been recited in their prayers by observant Jews every morning and every evening, when they lie down and when they rise. From ancient times, the Jews have firmly asserted their belief in one God --- Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one --- and he is a jealous God, such that thou shalt have no other god beside Him, say the Ten Commandments. This singular belief is perhaps the thing that most distinguished Judaism from the other historic religions of the world. For the Jews were monotheistic when other world religions were not, and this was the tradition of those early Christians, who were of course Jews, like Jesus and his apostles.

Instead, the early Church argued about whether the followers of Jesus had to be circumcised or observe the Mosaic dietary laws or keep the Jewish sabbath holy. Conversations about Jesus' divinity do not occur until Christians had separated from the larger Jewish community and became predominantly a Hellenistic religion of its own. It was only when Christians moved out from the synagogues to house churches and the catacombs, that they began to argue in the Greek marketplace about Jesus' humanity and divinity. The audience now was no longer religious Jews but Hellenized Greeks and God-fearing Romans. And Greeks and Romans, of course, were long accustomed to entertaining the idea of many Gods, and of Gods that often took a human form. This was the era of those great Christological debates of the church, as Christians

struggled to retain their Jewish monotheistic heritage while at the same time remaining faithful to their understanding of the uniqueness of the person of Jesus.

I for one would be more than happy to throw out the established Doctrine of the Trinity entirely, so that we Christians could each begin afresh with that essential religious experience of Jesus, and of God the Father, and with the ongoing Spirit of God in our midst, without being fed someone else's words and understandings, with concepts and ideas that are not entrenched in fourth century Greek and Latin theologies or politics, so that we could each find for ourselves the words and phrases that help us articulate this fundamental spiritual dimension of our lives, so that we could each find for ourselves the words and phrases that help us understand our relationship with Jesus, and the meaning of God for us here and now. That, I think, is the essential Christian spiritual endeavor, which because of the doctrine of the Trinity and its long and complicated history, most of us never really engage in.

We should all spend more time trying to embrace God in our lives, and less time trying to understand and define him with great accuracy. Jesus is indeed experienced as a unique reflection of the Mystery of God for us Christians, a person who somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. Yet our words and our phrases and our feeble doctrines cannot really articulate the

Truth of this spiritual matter, they can only hint at it. Because in the end God does, and must, remain a wonderful mystery, not to be understood and defined, but a mystery to be experienced and lived. AMEN.