

Progressive Christianity's Struggle with the Doctrine of the Trinity

Trinity Sunday

John 16:12-15 Romans 5:1-5
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The liturgical church calendar, as you may know, always designates the first Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday. As I am fond of mentioning at the beginning of this particular sermon each year, this is the day that good and learned preachers will walk up to the pulpit and struggle to explain how our unexplainable God relates to creation, and how we experience that relationship. And each and every year, no matter how hard I try, or any other preacher for that matter, God will remain an unexplainable mystery.

I am even more convinced, however, that in order to be a vibrant and relevant church in our day and age, **it is imperative that we keep our hearts and minds and spirits open to the basic understanding that there is always something more to God than we can comprehend.** That's why, as a self-proclaimed progressive Christian, I get so frustrated with those who claim to know all about God, those who are certain that they have all the "right" answers, and if we all just believed like they do then everything would be alright. That, however, is **the trap of spiritual arrogance.** And in case you're thinking that I am just talking about "those people," know that many of us need to look long and hard in the mirror as well, for most all people fall into that **trap of relying on one's own preconceived notions of Who God Is**, what God is like, how and where God is at work in the world, and what God does or doesn't do for us, requires of us, and promises us.

The point is, no matter how we come to understand the nature and character of God, **there is always something just beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding, beyond our sense of certainty.** And that, my friends, is what keeps folks like me, and I would suspect most of you, actively engaged in the journey of faith.

When it comes to trying to explain the concept of **God as Trinity**, as 3-in-one, the main struggle today for many of us progressive types, isn't so much in trying to understand that part of God we call **Creator** – the transcendent God who is before, behind, above, and beneath all things. Neither is our main struggle usually in trying to understand that part of God we call the **Holy Spirit** – the imminent presence of God who is beside us and within us.

Rather, **I would venture to guess that those of us on the cutting edge of progressive Christianity find the main struggle with the concept of the Trinity is in trying to understand that part of God we call Jesus Christ.**

It boils down to this for many folks: **was Jesus fully God in human form?** And for those who question this part of the ancient doctrine of the Trinity, **if they don't believe that Jesus was God, is it still possible to call Jesus Lord and Savior? Can they technically even be called a Christian? Or does that automatically make them a Unitarian? Or just simply damned to eternal hellfire and brimstone?**

If all these questions make you a bit uncomfortable, then welcome to the struggle to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in the 21st century. But this may help. Some of the greatest theological minds have been struggling with this since day one.

In my Trinity Sunday sermon two years ago I spend some time recalling the history that was involved in coming up with the traditional doctrine of the Trinity back in the 4th century. Religious leaders, under a mandate by Roman Emperor Constantine, gathered in a place called Nicea in 325 CE to try to come to a consensus on questions like:

- Was Jesus simply a man whose remarkable life could only be spoken of in terms of divinity?
- Was he God incarnate – God in the flesh – only pretending to be a human being?
- Was he something in-between?
- Did he somehow possess the same or similar “essence” of the Divine?

Their final answer came to be known as the **Nicene Creed**, and those that didn't sign on were, at best, excommunicated, or at worst, executed. But that didn't stop other councils in later centuries from continuing to argue over the definition of incarnation itself, with arguments raging over Jesus' “nature.”

Many of us embarked on an interesting journey last September in our adult church school class by studying a curriculum entitled: ***Living the Questions: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity***. As part of the written curriculum in the lesson on the Incarnation, it stated:

Today, countless Christians blithely recite the creeds without any sense of their original intent, the manner in which they came into being, or any thought that their original meaning could have ceased to have any relevance to contemporary life.

Many Christians simply assume that it is and always has been a fact that Jesus is God – without thinking about any of the theological implications of such an idea for a so-called monotheistic religion.

The humble mortal we call Jesus would likely be horrified at his deification by generations of well-meaning followers. The sage teacher and rabbi who pointed beyond himself to the Kingdom of God is unlikely to have elevated himself to the second member of the Trinity, let alone “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.”

Yet for many Christians, this is the perplexing nature of incarnation – despite options for more practical interpretations.

So, and I know this doesn't apply to everyone here today, for those of us who are no longer comfortable with ancient doctrinal declarations, what are some of those **"options for more practical interpretations"**? For those of you susceptible to heresy, you can close your ears. The progressive Christianity curriculum offers the following.

At the heart of Christianity is a Divinity who is incarnational. In some incomprehensible way, the Mystery of God was perceived to be incarnate in Jesus. The Spirit of Life was present in him in a way that made his presence transformational for people.

Although Gospel writers tried to explain it with virgin births, and Councils tried to define it with formulas and creeds [and doctrines], we are finally left with what Jesus evidently had – the call to make the love of God real in the world.

In my Trinity Sunday sermon last year I shared extensively from now-retired **Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong**, who in my opinion is left of left. He eloquently explains that he does not consider himself a Unitarian because even though he no longer accepts the ancient doctrine of the Trinity as written in the Nicene and Apostle Creeds, he nonetheless **seeks to remain in the debate over how we understand God in a triune way**. Spong writes:

I feel no great need to preserve the words of my religious past, but I never want to reject the experience of the past that caused the words of my faith story to come into being. **As a Christian, I seek to separate the experience of God, which I regard as eternal, from the traditional words used to explain that experience, which I always regard as time bound and transitory.**

When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words... I will fight with doctrines like Incarnation and the Trinity, but **I will never dismiss the truth that people were pointing to when these doctrines were first formed...** It is by living in the tension between the past and the future that my Christian life is formed. I could not abandon that struggle.

I find these words very helpful, for they help explain where many progressive Christians are in their own journey of faith. So how would I personally answer those tough questions I posed earlier?

- If a person does not believe in a literal way that Jesus was God, is it still possible to call Jesus Lord and Savior? **Yes.**
- Can that person technically be called a Christian? **Yes.**
- Does that automatically make them a Unitarian? **No.**

- Does it just simply damn that person to eternal hellfire and brimstone? Well for that, I think I will actually defer to traditional Reformed Protestant thought: **that is in God's hands and not for any human to decide.**

I will add, however, that **my understanding of God's unmerited grace would preclude anyone from being required to believe in any specific doctrinal statement in order to receive God's redemption and salvation**, because the concept of grace negates any need for works-righteousness on our part.

Be that as it may, I would like to conclude by continuing on a personal note. Let me share with you what I wrote about **my understanding of Jesus as the Second person of the Trinity in my own personal Statement of Faith**, written back in the fall of 2006 when I began a search for a new pastoral call. My entire Statement was shared at a meeting of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery when they voted to receive me into this Presbytery in March 2008. And just for the record, there were no questions about it from the floor. Quoting myself:

I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Through Jesus, God reveals God's self. Jesus is the human, visible embodiment of the invisible will of God. He exemplifies the undistorted image of God, an image that is present within each of us.

Jesus also reveals an unselfish love that expresses perfect obedience to the will of God. His ministry of healing, teaching, compassion, mercy, reconciliation, justice, and inclusion stands as a model for all people, reflecting God's love for all.

Through Jesus Christ, we know that God forgives our sins. By the mercy and unmerited grace of God alone, God assures us of our redemption and salvation.

I may write something different next year, or ten years from now, but that's where I've been on my own journey of faith. I encourage you to check-in with yourself to see where you are at this point in your own journey of faith.

And the struggle, including my own, to understand the triune nature of God continues.

Amen.