

# A Progressive Understanding of the Trinity

## Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20    2 Corinthians 13:11-13  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The context of today's liturgical emphasis is **Trinity Sunday**, which is always designated as the Sunday following Pentecost Sunday. It's an intentional time of focusing on the triune nature of God. The historical language, also known as the Trinitarian Formula, as we heard in Matthew 28:18, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This traditional language describes God as three-in-one, or one-in-three, as we sung earlier in the hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy!*, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

For those of us born and raised in the church, most of us learned about such things by reciting the Apostles' Creed each Sunday, usually memorizing it when going through Confirmation Class while in middle or high school. I don't know when College Hill stopped reciting the **Apostles' Creed** during worship, but it was before I arrived over 9 nine years ago. Just for fun, let's see how many of us can still remember it.

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and  
buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he  
ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints;  
the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

(Wow, I can recite that when sitting around others, or as I did three separate times earlier today, but I sure messed it up just now when standing up here looking at you.)

**It's important to know that the apostles, Jesus' disciples, did not write this creed. Rather, it reflects a particular theological understanding in the early church as it was developing its theology.** In fact, it didn't find its final form until hundreds of years after the apostles, even after the less familiar **Nicene Creed** that was written in **325 CE** during a Council of bishops called by Emperor Constantine after his and the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity. **The defining issue was trying to come up with a single doctrinal agreement as to the nature and character of Jesus. For Constantine, peace within the Church was essential to peace within the empire.**

The widening rift in the early church concerned questions such as: Was the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth really of the same 'substance' as God the Father, or did he just appear that way? Was Jesus fully God? Was Jesus fully human? How can he be

both? One of the most important questions in our day and age, then, is this: **Do these ancient creeds still reflect the best or only language we can use to describe how we experience God?**

Some of you may be wondering why this congregation no longer recites the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds. The easiest answer is that **a majority of progressives simply can not, with integrity, recite, "I believe", when we no longer believe everything that follows.** Many simply no longer believe, for example, in a virgin birth, or in Jesus' literal bodily resurrection. So should these folks be kicked out of the church? According to many traditionalists the answer is basically yes, for those folks no longer pass the litmus test of what qualifies a person, in their opinion, to be a Christian.

Not surprisingly, I respectfully disagree. For instance, **I have no problem with the Apostles' Creed – as a historical document that used the best language and understanding available in the first century Roman world.** So instead of throwing out the doctrine of the Trinity altogether, most progressive believe what lies behind it can still inform our understanding of the nature and character of God. But the opposite is also true. How we experience God can also inform our understanding of God as triune. After all, that's what the historical doctrine hoped to explain. But it did so through the filter of Greek philosophy. Therefore, in their understanding that God chooses to reveal God's self in three distinct ways, they used the term "persons". However, **this designation of God as three distinct "persons," yet still one God, has itself become problematic for many and has caused much confusion.** That's why many now prefer to understand God more as a 'presence'.

Regardless, we still start with the understanding that there is one and only one God, no matter how God is described. That goes back to the earliest monotheistic Judaic understanding of the ancient Hebrews. The earliest Christians then incorporated into this belief their understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus and the sense of his continued presence with them after his death. Added to this experience was the understanding that if we want to know what God is like we need to simply look at this Jesus. For those of us who continue to believe that, then we have every right to call ourselves Christians!

There is no doubt, however, that the ancient designation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is both **hierarchical and patriarchal.** And the major problem flowing out of this is that the Christian Church itself, following the culture of its day, also became obsessed with hierarchy and patriarchy – **top down and male dominated.** The same remains true in our day, though we are making some progress. That's why progressives today, especially feminist theologians, do not believe this is the best way to describe our experience and understanding of God.

Again, in response, many traditionalists, in order to avoid being criticized and/or challenged for their deeply held convictions and beliefs, wonder why those who no longer agree with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity don't stop calling themselves Christians and just become Unitarians. Well, some in this congregation have. And some have returned because they "missed Jesus" and using the Bible as our starting point to direct us in our life of faith.

Back in 2009, the now-retired Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**, a member of the Jesus Seminar, addressed this in an article interestingly entitled, **"Why I Am Not a Unitarian."** I shared much of this with you several years ago. Spong wrote it as a response to a growing chorus of folks who claimed that his understanding of Jesus was basically the same as Unitarians. Some of us could ask the same of ourselves. Spong starts with this reminder, "The temptation in all religion is to freeze the faith story in some literal and time-bound form and then make ultimate claims for that interpretation."

In both solidarity and departure with Unitarianism, Spong writes, **"I, like them, do not want to be part of a Christianity that fails to make room for those who need to probe intellectually and spiritually the creedal formulas of yesterday."** That approach leads us to find new ways to put into words how we understand and experience God's Sacred Presence. Ultimately, that's what this discussion is really all about.

As we all know, however, any words for and about God are woefully insufficient. Anything we come up with in our own day and time also runs the same risk of being literalized and absolutized. So Spong continues:

Every Christian generation must sing the Lord's song in the accents of its day and inside the bounds of knowledge available in its generation... **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 wrestle with the scriptures, but I will never abandon the scriptures. I will seek to break open the creeds, but I will never reject the creeds.** 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.

So where does that leave us in terms of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in our day and age and from a progressive perspective? As I've stated for a few years now, I currently take a more simplistic and limited approach to understanding the experience of God's Sacred Presence. For your consideration:

- I see a different way of defining God as 'Father,' or 'Creator,' as **God Beyond Us.**
- I see a different way of stating God as 'Son,' or 'Redeemer,' as **God Among Us.**
- And I see a different way of stating God as 'Holy Spirit,' or 'Sustainer,' as **God Within Us and all of creation.**

In other words, I am among a **growing number of progressive Christians who still understand God as utterly transcendent and outside of ourselves and creation itself, as well as present with and among all of creation, as well as within each of us and the community. That's why progressives can still self-identify as Trinitarian, and Christian.**

While acknowledging, then, that God is indeed and always will be a **Divine Mystery**, reflect upon your own understanding of the nature and character of God, because doing so is a crucial part of your journey of faith, and of how you put your faith into action.

Who and What is God?? That's your homework. How would you define and describe your experience?

Amen.