

## “The Trinity: Why It Matters (Right Now)”

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Once a year, the Sunday after Pentecost, we come around to Trinity Sunday. Now you may be thinking, “There are a whole lot of other things going on right now that are more important than talking about the Trinity.” Believe me, I hear where you’re coming from. And trust me, this *will* be relevant.

In the early centuries of the church there were huge debates about whether Jesus was really a man or just a spirit; about whether God had created Jesus; about the relationship of God and the Holy Spirit. What the church settled on was essentially this: there is one God in three “persons,” three different “forms,” so to speak. There is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These are not three different gods; they are *one* God. They are distinct, yet they share the same substance; they are of the same nature. They are all *God*, but they are not the same as each other. All three are eternal, without beginning and without end. Jesus was not *created* by God the Father, but rather *begotten* by him. The Holy Spirit *proceeds* from God the Father, and ... well ... maybe also from the Son. One of the big issues that still divides Western Christians from Eastern Christians has to do with that little detail.

But does the Trinity even matter? We’ve got mass protests in the streets right now, and it’s not about the nuances of the Trinity. My answer: *Yes*. The Trinity *does* matter. I’m going to tell you why.

See, what we Christians say is that there is *one ultimate authority* in this universe. One ultimate *arbiter* in matters that pertain to the human race. We know this ultimate authority in three forms.

First, there is *God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible*. The three most important words here are “Father,” “Almighty,” and “Maker.” The word “Father” refers to God’s relationship to Jesus; it does not mean that God is biologically male. It also refers to God’s relationship to *us*, to the ability we have to become children of the living God through Jesus. We do not start out – the way Jesus did – with God as our Father; as the Gospel of John puts it, “to all who receive him” – all who receive Jesus – “to those who believe in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” We *become* children of God *because of* our relationship with Jesus.

Which means, not every person on this earth is a child of God. Every person was *made* by God; all of us are God’s *creations*; but we are not all God’s *children*. Anybody can *become* a child of God. It does not matter whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, *whatever*. It does not matter what language they speak, what country they come from, how much money they have, how much education they have received, or any other worldly factor. The only thing that matters is *faith in Jesus Christ*. The book of Revelation tells us that heaven is filled with “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” (Revelation 7:9) Those aren’t *my* words; those are the *Bible’s* words. *Anyone* can become a child of God. So if your image of heaven doesn’t have black people in it ... *your image of heaven isn’t biblical*.

The word “Almighty” means that *God’s* got the power. *He’s* in charge. We may have power in various forms here on earth. Some of you have authority over your employees, or authority over the children in your classroom. But there is one being to whom *all* of us are subject to – whether we are willing to recognize it or not. *God’s* got *way* more power than all of us put together, no matter *what* our job is, no matter *how* important we think we are. I’ll have more to say about that in a few minutes.

God is also the *creator* of all things. Every human on the face of this planet was made by God, and – so Genesis tells us – *in the image of God*. “God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) If you’re male, you were created in the image of God. If you’re female, *you too* were created in the image of God. If you’re white, you were created in the image of God. If you’re black, *you too* were created in the image of God. God doesn’t have a body; but if God did, it would be male *and* female, white *and* black, and everything else. *That’s what the Bible says* – isn’t it? “*In the image of God* he created them.” Lot of people think that God looks like a white man. The truth is that God looks like *everyone*. Or, rather, that everyone looks like *God*. The staff in a Chinese restaurant – *they were made in the image of God*. The staff in a Mexican restaurant – *they were made in the image of God*. When you see a black man walking down a Lansing street, or you interact with your black female colleague at work, you better believe it: *they were made in the image of God*. All the footage we’ve been seeing the past couple weeks, the protestors, the police, the blacks, the whites, *every single person* – they were *all* made in the image of God.

So why can’t we all get along? Why do some whites not see the image of God in people whose skin is a different color? Why do some people deny a fundamental truth about *our shared humanity*?

On a lighter note: God also made the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the solar systems, the galaxies. God made the mountains and the forests, the rivers and the plains. God made the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, all the land animals great and small. God made my dog and the squirrels he likes to chase. And the angels too. All the *invisible* beings in the spiritual realm. God made it *all*.

Except: not Jesus. God did not *create* Jesus. Jesus existed with God in the very beginning. He was *begotten* by God before time began. He is the eternal Word of God. This Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He lived a human life; he died a human death. During his time on earth he helped many people who were suffering, and he taught many things. What he taught – those words are not *human* words. Those words are *God’s* words. When he said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” that wasn’t just a human talking. That was *God* talking. When he chastised the Pharisees for neglecting justice and the love of God, that was *God* talking. When he said, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them,” that was *God* talking. When he said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” that was *God* talking. *God* had come to earth in *human* form.

So this man, this *God*, lived a human life, died a human death, rose from the dead, and now lives and reigns with God – and, so the Bible tell us, *he will come again to judge the living and the dead*.

Now, remember. Who’s got the authority? *God does*. What’s God going to do with that authority? Give it to Jesus. God’s going to give Jesus authority to hold us accountable for our words and deeds. God is going to send Jesus back to hold *all* of us accountable, for *all* our words and deeds.

We have a criminal justice system in this country. We have law enforcement officials. We have ways to try to manage *right* and *wrong*. It’s not perfect. It needs to be improved. It may never be *fully*

perfect, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep striving to *make it better*. Make it more *fair*. We have to live with one another. We have to have some kind of system of accountability that we can more-or-less agree on, that gives *all* people equal rights, and equal protection, and equal justice, *regardless* of what a person looks like. We have to have a system, because God gave us free will, God gave us the ability to *choose* our own words and actions, and sometimes, we humans do *horrible* things to one another. *Unspeakable* things to one another. Sometimes we do unspeakable things *in the name of God*.

Here's the good news. If we don't handle justice correctly here on earth, there is *Someone* who will. If our justice system here on earth doesn't catch all the people who do wrong, we can bank on the fact that there's a *better* justice system in heaven that is guaranteed to catch all those that got away. God will send Jesus to judge the living and the dead. It doesn't matter if people are Christian or not. He's coming for *all* of us. God has *standards* for the whole human race. God gives *all* of us a chance to *repent*. A chance to say, "I really screwed that one up, and I'm sorry." In Matthew 11, Jesus condemns three whole cities that are unrepentant. "Woe to you!" he says. "On the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you!" Remember what God did to Sodom in Genesis? *Fear God!* God's not kidding! God really *means* it! The gospel story starts with Jesus telling people to *repent!* I'm not usually a fire-and-brimstone preacher, but *my God, Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead* – and that means *you* and that means *me* and that means *everybody!*

Maybe we *all* need to get down on a knee right now. Maybe we all need to take some responsibility for the things we have done – or not done – that have hurt people who don't look like us. Maybe we all need to acknowledge that we participate in systems that allow racism to continue. We may not still have slavery in this country, but there is still injustice, and *we* are responsible for that. *We* need to do *our* part to help *fix* it. Because *if we don't*, we are going to have to one day look Jesus in the eye, and tell him *why we didn't do something* to help our sisters and our brothers who were made in the image of God and who didn't have the same privileges that we had, simply because God blessed them with a different color skin, and too many of us saw that skin color as a curse instead of a blessing.

Finally: God the Holy Spirit. This is the *power of God that lives in us* when we follow Jesus. It's what helps us grow in Christian virtues. It's what inspired the biblical prophets to speak truth to power, like when Moses stood up to Pharaoh, or when Elijah stood up against wicked Queen Jezebel. It's what enables us to do *good* when the world around us wants to do *evil*. When you are part of a group that is about to do something that is just *wrong*, the Holy Spirit is what gives you the gumption to say "*I'm not doing that*" – even if it breaks a relationship, or makes you lose an election, or gets you fired from your job. Doing the right thing isn't always popular. Following Jesus doesn't always win friends. Too many people become *cowards* when faced with a choice like that. They don't live by the Holy Spirit.

I did something very, very wrong to a person of color when I was a child. I did it because I thought it would impress my friends. They were taunting another kid, and I thought the cool thing was to do it too. I cared more about how I would *look to my friends* than about what was *right* ... or about how the *other kid* would feel – or the *memories* he would surely still have, *years* down the line.

I was a coward. I wasn't living by the Holy Spirit. I pray I *never* make a mistake like that again.

So ... the Trinity. Does it matter? You *bet* it does. Is it relevant? *You bet it is*. God made *all* of us in his image. Jesus calls *all* of us to repent. The Holy Spirit inspires *all* of us ... *to do the right thing*.

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