
It's a mystery!
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on texts about the trinity ... wait, there aren't any!

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday. I'm delighted to have such an easy topic today, especially since I've just spent 2 full days in Sudbury at the "Festival of Faith". I was hoping I could coast a bit today. How hard can it take to talk about an idea that has been around for over 1700 years? Surely there is nothing new to say about the Trinity. We just need to forget the fact that people have been fighting about the meaning of the Trinity for those 1700 years.

According to Wikipedia, "The Trinity is the Christian doctrine concerning the nature of God, which defines one God existing in three, coeternal, consubstantial divine persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, three distinct persons sharing one essence/substance/nature."

[image: emmanuel college]

I remember taking my first theological class at Emmanuel College in Toronto. The subject of the Trinity came up. And the professor - Michael Bourgeois - asked students for our ideas of how we understood the Trinity. We were all first year students, but most of us had been in the church for years. And we had certainly thought about different ways to understand the Trinity. Fairly typical ideas emerged. For example the idea that God is three persons in the same way that I am three persons - a father, a son, and a husband. As students shared their deep insights, Michael dutifully took each idea and wrote a summary of the position on the blackboard at the front of the class. When we had finished impressing Michael with our vast knowledge and great insights, we had a list of perhaps 5 or 6 different ways to understand the Trinity up on the blackboard.

And then Michael did something very powerful. He pointed to each of our statements in order on the board and named the particular heresy that each idea represented. He did that to every single one of our statements. Not one of us had explained the Trinity in a way that had not been condemned as a heresy by the early

church. By the way, the word “heresy” only means something that is contrary to official church teachings.

But after my initial shock wore off, I found it actually reassuring. As students, we might all have been heretics. But at least we were classic heretics. And I always feel better when a problem that I cannot solve myself has been around for a very long time.
[image: trinity is like 3-in-1 shampoo and other stupid statements]

In actual fact, Michael was being gentle with us. Another theological teacher, Michael Patton, posted an article entitled, “The Trinity is Like 3-in-1 Shampoo and other stupid statements”¹ Patton was far more blunt than Michael.

To quote Patton, “‘The doctrine of the Trinity is like an egg: three parts, one thing.’ Ever heard that? How about this, ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is like a three leaf clover: three leaves, one clover.’ Or how about THIS, ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is like water: three forms (ice, steam, liquid) one substance.’ But the greatest I ever heard was by a guy in one of my classes. He said that he thought that the Trinity was like 3-in-1 shampoo: three activities, one substance.” Stupid statements. Creative, but stupid. Do not use them. Any of them. Ever.”²

I’m tempted to ask for a show of hands of who here is a heretic. But instead, I present 3 of the more classic ways to be heretical about the trinity.

[image: 3-in-1 shampoo]

Modalism: The belief that God is one God who shows Godself in three different ways, sometimes as the Creator, sometimes as child, and sometimes as spirit. Modalism describes God in purely functional terms. That is a heresy. The trinity states that God exists in 3 person, not three modes of functionality. The idea that the trinity is like 3-in-1 shampoo is an example of modalism.

[image: egg]

Tritheism: The belief that we have three Gods, all who share a similar nature, but not the exact same nature. In this, the nature of God is either distinguished or divided, which destroys the unity of God. That is a heresy. The trinity states a belief in three

¹ <https://credohouse.org/blog/the-trinity-is-like-3-in-1-shampoo-and-other-stupid-statements>

² Ibid.

persons who share in an identical, united nature, not three persons who share in a species called, “God”. The idea that the trinity is like an egg (made up of the shell, the white stuff, and the yolk) is an example of the heresy called tritheism. Because the yolk is completely separate in nature from the shell.

[image: cartoon trinity goes for coffee]

Subordinationism: The belief that the three persons in the trinity exist in a hierarchy. For example, some people believe that God the Father is the greatest and the most powerful. Coming in second is God the Son, followed by the second runner-up, the Holy Spirit. That thinking is a heresy. The trinity requires that the three persons are equal in essence.

Referring to the trinity, Patton says, “I often tell my students that if they say, “I get it!” or “Now I understand!” that they are ... celebrating the fact that they are a heretic! When you understand the biblical principles and let the tension within the trinity remain without rebuttal, then you are orthodox. When you solve the tension, you have most certainly entered into one of the errors that we seek to avoid. Confused? Good! That is just where you need to be.”³

[image: 3 = 1. Any questions?]

On paper, the trinity reads like, $3 = 1$. Any questions? The trinity demonstrates tension. And I agree with Patton that we should not attempt to resolve that tension. To be orthodox we have to live with the tension, not pretend that the tension does not exist. I asked my computer to explain the the trinity to me. Do you want to see the result?

[image: computer on fire]

Stay tuned for me to share my own understanding of the trinity in a moment. And if you ask nicely, I’ll share with you the easiest and perhaps the most orthodox way to understand the trinity.

But first, the conversation into the Trinity invites us to consider our own images of God. And the relationship between God and Jesus.

[image: who do you say that I am?]

I’m reminded of a joke - based on the text in Mark, chapter 8. Quoting: And Jesus

³ Ibid.

went on with his disciples, to the village of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way Jesus asked his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead, others say you are Elijah, and others say you are one of the prophets.” And Jesus asked them, “but who do you say that I am?”. Peter answered and said, “You are the eternally begotten Logos of the uncaused Father, homoousios with the divine essence, proceeding not in time but in relation, incarnate without confusion, change, division, or separation, possessing two natures in one hypostasis, fully consubstantial with humanity according to the flesh and with divinity according to the Godhead. The second person of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity, preexistent, omnipotent, ineffable.”⁴ And Jesus said to Peter, “What the hell are you talking about?”

[image: just because you are a heretic doesn't mean that you are wrong]

Is God really that complicated - or is it just that humans create images of God that are complicated. In the words of the Islamic theologian Abdal Hakim Murad, “One of the virtues of the Semitic type of consciousness is the conviction that ultimate reality must be ultimately simple, and that the Nicene talk of a deity with three persons, one of whom has two natures, but who are all somehow reducible to authentic unity, quite apart from being rationally dubious, seems intuitively wrong. God, the final ground of all being, surely does not need to be so complicated.”

[image: how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?]

Some people argue that discussing God and arguing about the trinity is of limited value anyway. Instead, we should spend our time in prayer, in spiritual practices, in worship. We should attempt to have experiences of God rather than arguing over theological nuances, like arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. If we do that then there is no need to argue whether God is simple or complicated, because God is best related to by simply being experienced. Many people have spent much of their lives pursuing experiences of God. From committed monastics to regular people like us, who find our own ways to open ourselves to the presence of God.

⁴ I asked ChatGPT for some word salad theological jargon about the Trinity. It offered these words, with the disclaimer that it was “absurd but with rhythm and just enough real doctrine to make it dangerous.”

[image: smells and bells]

To that end, many religious traditions use different symbols to express, or reveal, the presence of God. These symbols also emphasize the notion that God is mysterious. You might think that an invisible God does not need to be revealed. But most people relate better to something a bit more concrete. In some Orthodox Churches, for example, they use the clanging of cymbals in worship to depict the presence of God. Many Roman Catholic churches use bells and incense for the same purpose. Catholics have long-held traditions that they refer to as “smells and bells”. Music and art have been used in various ways to evoke the presence of God. In the United Church, we often use very simple symbols - like a lit candle - to represent the presence of God. And I’m sure that we all have our own personal symbols and actions that represent the presence of God. As do I.

[image: constantine]

There is one more aspect of the Trinity that bears consideration. In the year 313 AD, Constantine played a significant role in the proclamation called “the Edict of Milan”. That edict declared - among other things - tolerance for Christianity in the Roman Empire. Prior to the year 313, Christians were largely persecuted. So let us put our minds back to those days. Imagine we belong to an early church. Our group is persecuted. Therefore, our meetings are held in secret. It is not like today where we have a big sign outside that says, “Chapel in the Park United Church”. In those days, Church meetings were both private and secret. If a stranger approached you and asked about your church, you would be suspicious that perhaps they wanted to infiltrate your church in order to bring in soldiers to destroy it. Christians were naturally wary of strangers. So before you invited a stranger into your church, you would want some assurance that they were in fact Christian. But how could you tell if a person is Christian back then? That was the purpose of creeds. If a person would confess belief in a creed - and in the trinity - then maybe they were legit. The trinity was formalized in part to help separate Christians from non-Christians in the Roman Empire.

Now let us bring our minds back to the present. Christians in North America are not persecuted. We are allowed to advertise. The trinity was never intended to separate Christians from other Christians. It was designed to separate Christians from non-

Christians. Which means that you and I do not have to agree on exactly what the trinity means. It is ok that the trinity contains within it tensions that we cannot resolve. Perhaps the tension embedded in the trinity serves a different purpose today.

So what should we do with the tension inherent within the trinity? How should we understand the trinity today? Well if you are ready - I will share my own idea of the best way to understand the trinity. Do you really want to know?

[image: the easiest and best way to understand the trinity]

I believe that the easiest - and also the best - way to understand the trinity is
[image: is to not try to understand it]

to not try to understand it. At all. As Patton said, to not try to make sense of it logically. Because it was never intended to be a logical statement. Yes, I preach a rational type of Christianity. But the most rational thing to do with the trinity is to not treat it rationally.

Instead of trying to understand the trinity, consider this. The trinity offers 3 lenses on how we might experience God in our midst.

[image: lenses of trinity]

One lens is God as father, creator, a person who is “out there”. This is a powerful lens for many people. I know many people who find a lot of meaning in the image of God as creator, as the “person” who makes life make sense.

One lens is God as a human being. In Jesus, yes, but as all of us as children of God. That human lens connects us to daily life, to sweat, toil, love, even death. That is the lens that says it is important to reach out to others today.

One lens is God as spirit, enveloping us, surrounding us, supporting us. Sustaining us. The spirit includes the peace of God which passes all understanding.

[image: the trinity is not about being right. It is about being open minded.]

The good news of the trinity is this. We do not need to argue about how these three images of God work together. Instead we can simply realize that even within our own community here at Chapel in the Park United Church each of us resonates in our own ways with these 3 different lenses - and perhaps other lenses too. Some of us resonate with one particular lens. Some of us resonate with 2 or 3 of the lenses. And that is all ok. We do not have to agree. The important thing is to come to a deeper sense of

how we experience God in our midst, and then find ways to do that.

This community - as a community of faith - can help you do that. We are not alone. We are in this together ... particularly if we see each other as partners on the journey of life. We do not have to agree with each other on issues of spirituality. We only need to love each other, and to appreciate each other for the unique gift that each of us brings to the table.

That is why our worship services are designed to express God in different ways. And I hope that at least some of what happens today resonates with your own experiences of God. And when an image does not resonate for you, please understand that it resonates with someone else. We are all in this together. We all matter.

[image: christ candle]

I want to close with one more thing. When we light the Christ candle during worship we say that the candle reminds us that Christ is present with us. And I enjoy that part of the service. But I far prefer the part of the service where we extinguish the Christ candle. Because that is a reminder that even without the candle, Christ is present in us, with us, and through us. In us, with us, and through us. That's the trinity in action!

And perhaps that is enough. Perhaps God does not have to be complicated after all.

Amen.