
In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Trinity Sunday

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I said, "In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." I typically begin every sermon with those words. Usually, of course, those words indicate that people may sit down! But it seems to me that people ought to stand up when we hear those words.

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Christian Church proclaims that God is One and God is Three. That mysterious truth has confounded many a preacher and many a congregation if we try to grasp only its *logic*. The most successful *logical* definition of the Trinity remains my old Neapolitan Ice Cream theory. God is one ice cream: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, and every taste --every taste!--is delightfully delicious.

In a staff meeting this past week, as we read the gospel for today --this short conclusion to the gospel of Matthew that barely mentions Father, Son, and Holy Spirit-- a lone and innocent voice asked the question, "Is this short verse the best biblical authority we can find for the doctrine of the Trinity?"

The answer is yes, along with the verse we often read in Second Corinthians, where Paul alludes to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13.13). The Bible simply does not explain the doctrine of Trinity.

In fact, the Bible rarely spells out the logic of any doctrine. It never does. The Bible tells the stories of truth. The Bible does not describe the logic of doctrine; the Bible describes the story of truth. I hope we all know that!

We leave it to preachers to provide the connection between the stories of truth and the logic of doctrine. But we preachers are also supposed to provide a third content: the particulars of practice. Yes, a trinity of content occurs. We are to move among the stories of truth, the logic of doctrine, and the particulars of practice.

"In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Today, Trinity Sunday is the only feast day of the church that is devoted to a doctrine and not to an event or person, or story. Yes, the day often stymies preachers and congregations, but I love this day.

For this day, Trinity Sunday represents the clue --the secret, the answer, the mystery-- of what Christian practice is all about. This doctrine represents the mystery of how to behave as a Christian.

"In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Our God is One. Our God is Three. This formula is not meant to be simply a proposition of faith, something to believe in cerebrally so that we will pass the orthodox test. No, this formula is meant to describe the image of God, the very image of God. Our God is a triune God, a God who is actually three persons living in relationship.

Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity models how to live together in mutual and loving relationship. After all, we are created in the image of God. That is how Genesis, chapter one, tells the story. If we are made in the image of God, and if God is a relationship of persons in community, then we are meant to live in the relationship of community.

Actually, there is a story of how the doctrine of the Trinity developed in the first several centuries of Christian history. It was not easy. Early Christian history is replete with communities who chose to live according to only one person of the Trinity instead of all three. The Montanists were obsessed with the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of Father and Son; they were declared heretics. The Arians were obsessed with the Father to the exclusion of the divinity of the Son; they were declared heretics. Some Gnostics claimed that the God of Jesus was a God different from the Old Testament God; they were declared heretical.

In short, any obsession with one person of the Trinity, taken to an absolute extreme, became heresy in the Christian Church. Another way of saying this is that homogeneity became heresy in the Christian tradition. Classical Christianity, Trinitarian Christianity, knows that God appears to humanity in different persons, in diversity and in relationship.

A man named Bill Bishop has written a book describing how Americans are segregating ourselves, politically and geographically, obsessed with homogenous behavior. In the year 2004, he points out; almost half of all Americans lived in counties whose elections were decided by landslides. The book is called *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*; and Bill Bishop admits it's counterintuitive. "It's counterintuitive," Bishop writes, "but people grow more extreme within homogenous groups as a way to conform."¹ People grow more extreme when they congregate in homogenous groups.

Another way of saying that is that people become absolutists when we focus on only one person of the Godhead, when we focus on only one way that God reveals himself to humanity. The triune God is revealed in a multiplicity of ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Christian Church is where we are supposed to live in Trinity! The Church is supposed to be where we learn to live in relationship with people who are different from us and with idioms, styles and languages that are different from one another!

If we are healthy, this Trinity model of relationship should affect all that we do in the Christian Church. In our Christian education classes, in our mission and outreach efforts, in our music programs, in our prayer groups, we learn that God is present -the Triune God is present-- in different idioms and languages and styles. There is no cultural medium; there is no incarnational medium, with an automatic advantage to communicating the grace of God.

A man named Lamin Sanneh, Professor of History at Yale University, makes similar points in his recent, masterful book, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*.² The title of that book is taken from our gospel text today. He claims that Christianity can make disciples of all nations precisely because Christianity is not restricted to one culture or language or style alone. "No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal that it can be excluded." (page 25).

Furthermore, his refreshing historical overview reminds us that worldwide Christianity has always used the language of the vernacular. Christianity was never limited to the official and formal languages -like Greek or Latin. He writes that "Christianity spread as a religion without the language of its founder -in striking contrast, for example, to Islam." (page 25) "Christianity invested in idioms and cultures that existed for purposes other than Christianity." (page 25)

Today, for example, we think of our English, Anglican tradition as exquisite and beautiful. And so it is. But Lamin Sanneh reminds us that Christianity is larger. At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 AD, the very English language was

considered vulgar and unclean. Unclean and prohibited! English was reviled as a harsh tongue, "like the grunting of pigs or the roaring of lions." (page 41) It would not have occurred to anyone, in the ninth century, to write in British, or Celtic. Latin was the only real language. Lamin Sanneh calls the process of Church growth "Christian Roots and Vernacular Bloom." (page 45) Healthy Christianity always speaks the language and idiom of the vernacular.

Finally, Lamin Sanneh writes that "We need to divest Christianity, if not of the baggage of empire and power entirely, and the accompanying guilt complex, then of the presumption of the advantage of civilization. ... [Christianity] is a teeming diversity that attests to the religion's genius for fostering a spirit of unity along with a variety of styles and idioms." (page 55).

"A spirit of unity with a variety of styles and idioms," he says. This is Trinitarian Christianity, Christianity with the ability to live in relationship with variety and diversity! This is why we send visitors on a mission trip to Tanzania.

And this is also the proper model of Christian intellectual inquiry and spiritual thinking! It is not just "proposition A" that we believe. We also believe "B." And it's not just "A" or "B." There is also "C" that we believe. And "C" is not just the synthesis of "A" and "B." And "C" is not merely a compromise between "A" and "B." "C" is an entity, a truth, in its own right. God is "A." And God is "B." And God is also "C." God is Father. God is Son. God is Holy Spirit.

Our own intellectual tradition, the Anglican comprehensive tradition, recognizes Trinitarian dogma more accurately than any other theology. As long as we do not hold ourselves hostage to any particular culture, or language, or idiom, we witness that God can use any medium to bring grace and love to humanity.

Faithful Christians are Democrats, and faithful Christians are Republicans, and they are in other political parties, too. Faithful Christians are in one education class at church, and they are also in another. Faithful Christians are in one mission project, and they are also in another. Faithful Christians sing one style of music, and faithful Christians also sing another.

And the Trinity is true, the Trinity is true, in your own home as well. In your own household, God is present in Father. And God is also present in Mother. God is present in Child. No one of those persons is any more important than another. God is Mother, Daughter, and Renewing Spirit.

The Trinity is true in your friendships, too. You have a best friend. Wonderful; that is good. But the two of you also have another friend. That friend is different, but that friend is just as faithful and true as the two of you. That friend is another angle of love. And that friend has another friend, too. God is One; and God is Three.

The great formula of today, "in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," the Holy Trinity, is not just a stiff piece of doctrine un-attached to any particular practice of Christianity. This wonderful and mysterious doctrine is actually at the heart of all our Christian behavior. It is how we live in relationships of diversity, and acknowledging together the One God of Love.

May every sermon begin in the Name of the Trinity. And may every sermon end that way, too. Let us stand. Let us stand for the doctrine of the holy and undivided Trinity. God is One. God is Three.

AMEN.

[And here follows the recitation of the Nicene Creed, the historic symbol of Christian belief and practice grounded in Trinitarian theology.]

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

¹From *The Utne Reader* magazine, May-June 2008, page 46.

²Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford: University Press, 2008.

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