
Dogma and Wisdom: What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

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

*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, she takes her stand;
,The Lord created me [wisdom] at the beginning of his work; the first of his acts of long ago. ---Proverbs 8*

How thrilling to hear these words as our Old Testament lesson on Trinity Sunday! Unfortunately, it has been the case that priests dreaded preaching on Trinity Sunday, the only day of the liturgical year based on a doctrine, rather than a person or event. It's hard to preach about doctrine or -worse yet"" what has become known as dogma. (It's also been the case that parishioners dreaded listening to a sermon on the Trinity!)

How does one explain One God in three persons? Over time, the typical analogies have emerged. The notion of one God in three persons is like a three-leafed clover: one plant with three leaves. Or the triune God is like a triangle. Or, for the more scientific-minded, God is like ice, water, and steam: three representations of the same substance.

As some of you know, my favorite Trinitarian analogy is what I call the Neapolitan Ice Cream Theory of the Trinity: one ice cream in three delicious flavors!

But the real question of today is: So what? What difference does the Trinity make? What difference does it make how we define God? Should we be worried if someone does not get the doctrine right?

This morning, I want to say, "Yes; it does make a difference." There is an old story about a wise priest who heard that one of his students was an atheist. The wise priest went to the young atheist and remarked, "So you do not believe in God." "That's right," said the student.

"Well," said the priest, "describe for me this God you do not believe in." The student said, "Well, I just don't believe in a god who has a long white beard, and who sits up in a place we call heaven, watching our every move and keeping a book of judgment."

"You know what?" said the priest, "I don't believe in a god like that either."

There's a lot of talk about atheism these days. Some of the most popular books in our bookstores are those that either defend atheism or that attack the institutions of religion. Some of you know those books; you've pondered them.

One such book is the latest from Richard Dawkins, called "The God Delusion." But this book has a severe problem of definition. The problem is that Dawkins chooses the wrong definition of God not to believe in. In the very first chapter, he dismisses the very notion of God which is the one a lot of us believe in!

Our definition of God can liberate us, or it can oppress us. Our definition of God can exalt us, or it can make us look like

fools.

That's why this Sunday in the church year is so important. This is Trinity Sunday. This Sunday is our attempt to do the impossible. We try to make sense about God. We try to say something definitive and descriptive about a God who is above absolute definition and comprehension.

I want to say a good word about defining God. But I want to say a good word today, not only for the definition of God. I want to say a good word about something that a lot of progressive Christians are wary towards. I want to say a good word for *dogma*.

Some of us progressive types don't like the word "dogma." We have seen dogma and doctrine turn ugly and violent. In the name of dogma, Christians have unfortunately lifted up literalism and absolutism.

I saw another great bumper sticker the other day: "My karma ran over your dogma."

It's time to rescue dogma. Careful dogma, which is stated Christian doctrine, is actually a good and necessary piece of Christianity. What we should spurn is a certain type of dogma. We should spurn the literalist definition of dogma.

One of the things wrong with the Church ---and our culture, too--- is that we are imprisoned in literalist captivity. Perhaps we are in the age of "The Literalist Captivity of the Church." But it's in other places besides the church. Everywhere around us, people insist on literalist, wooden, and non-imaginative interpretations.

Obviously this is true about scripture. Some of us are chained to a literalist interpretation of scripture. But it is true about other things, too, such as scientific materialism, or evolution, or physics, or even history.

These addictions challenge the spirituality of the church. The church can be said to be in literalist captivity. This literalist captivity commands that unless something is literal, then it's not real or true. So we perceive bible verses only literally. Or we perceive scientific theory so literally that we see a chasm between evolution theory and theistic creation. Or we view something as real only if it meets literal historical criteria. Finally, the same captivity has enslaved dogma. We take dogma to be either literally true or rigid, or else it is false.

I love today because Trinity Sunday is not a literal day. Today is a day that honors a doctrine, but that doctrine is not meant to be rigid and impersonal. The doctrine of the Trinity is a dogma of the Church, but it is a dogma that releases and frees us!

We are dealing today with the very definition of God. How can we describe God? What language shall we use? Is God a shepherd? Is God a rock? Is God a son? Is God a heavenly dove?

Yes, God is all these things, but God is not those things literally. This ought to make sense for those of us with common sense, who has listened to Wisdom as she cries out on the corner!

If we were absolutely literal about everything we believed about God, then we would say something like this priest friend of mine says: "A literalist interpretation of scripture tells us that God is rock that sent a bird to cause a virgin to give birth to loaf of bread."

That couldn't possible be right!

So, here we are at definition. Who is God?

At our best, the Christian Church relies on wisdom, not mechanical literalism. We rely upon the wisdom that the Book of Proverbs speaks about. That wisdom was in the beginning with God. That wisdom is God. She is spoken of as feminine in Proverbs, chapter 8; she raises her voice and calls out from the streets. But that wisdom is also known as Word in the New Testament. That wisdom, that Word, is incarnate in Jesus Christ.

And over the first three centuries of the Church's life, that wisdom inspired what we know now as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It is not a doctrine that is literally spelled out in Scripture. It has no definitive scriptural proof text.

It is merely a wise doctrine that makes eloquent sense of our experience of God. God is One, yes. God is One. But God is also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. God is beyond the distinction between male and female; and yet God is masculine and feminine. God is beyond what we can imagine, and God is also right before our eyes.

The doctrine of the Trinity opens up God for us. The doctrine does not close off.

God is eternal creator, but God is also flesh and blood. God is located in time and space, in Jesus Christ, but God is also spirit, transcending time and space.

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I praise the doctrine of the Trinity today. In fact, I praise the *dogma* of the Trinity today. It is not a literal dogma. It is a dogma that allows the image of God to be more than one image.

Sure, it is complex, but the spirit of the very doctrine speaks against narrow literalism and rigid dogmatism. The doctrine itself proclaims various points of view about God!

And, finally, one more thing. This doctrine of the Trinity declares that God lives in relationship. The persons of God are related to each other. They point to each other and adore one another and respect each other. At the heart of God are three person who live and love in relationship.

Does it make a difference? If we are meant to be in the image of God, then this doctrine makes a stunning difference. We, too, are not meant to be alone. We, too, do not consist of only one image. This doctrine means that we, too, are meant to live and love in relationship, in relationship with persons who are different from us.

This is the God I believe in. The triune God is a God who makes a difference, leading us into a wisdom that is beyond literalism, leading us into loving relationship with those different from us, leading us into the mystery of eternal glory.

AMEN.

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