

SERMON SERIES ON WHAT WE BELIEVE - We Believe There Is One God, Eternally Existent In Three Persons: Father, Son And Holy Spirit.

Introduction

We have begun a series of messages on what we believe as a church. It is natural and necessary that we considered our belief in the Bible first, because everything else we believe follows this fundamental belief—even, *and especially* our belief in God.

Have any of you seen the documentary T.V. series on Investigation Discovery, entitled *Who the Bleep Did I Marry!?* The series tells the story of people, mostly women, who find out that their spouse has committed a crime during their marriage. How could you live with someone and know them intimately, and not know they are such a deviant!?

I guess the program shows us that, even if we're married to someone, we may not really know them, because deep inside every person are things that can't be known unless that person makes them known.

While there is plenty of evidence and many persuasive arguments for the *existence* of God outside of the Bible, we cannot know God *personally* and *intimately* apart from the Bible. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to us; His "autobiography," "His story," as it were.

And so, based on the Bible—God's revelation of Himself—we *believe there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Now, most people, I dare say, believe in *a* god or perhaps *gods*—in some essence greater than anything else (there are very few real atheists), though many who say they believe in a god, live as if there were no god. We call these "practical atheists."

But I don't see my task in this message as having to persuade or even remind anyone that there is a God. My task is to declare that we believe in *the God of the Bible*. And the Bible declares God to be one, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This triune nature of God is one of the hardest concepts for us to grasp. And it is this concept that distinguishes the Christian faith from the other monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Islam.

I remember an encounter I had with a Muslim one time. When he found out I was a Christian pastor, he asked me, "Why do you believe in three gods!?" He was referring, of course, to the Christian confession of belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, what we often refer to as the "Holy Trinity."

Now, we don't believe in three gods, of course. But **why** do we believe in God as one,

eternally existent in three persons? And how do we reconcile such a three-part distinction while at the same time affirming the apparent contradiction that God is one?

GOD IS UNIQUE

First of all, we must affirm that God is not only the *only* God, He is *unique* in every sense of the word! In other words, there is no one and nothing like Him.

Genesis 1:1 says in part, ***In the beginning God . . .*** Before anything existed, there was God. No one “created” God; He has always existed. And He is unique in the strictest sense. God is not merely “one,” He is the *only* One (Shedd, William G.T., *Dogmatic Theology*, p.222); He is “wholly other.”

Since God is unique, we cannot expect to fully understand Him by comparing Him to anything else.

You’ve no doubt, heard how the triune nature of God may be compared to water in it’s three forms: liquid, solid and gas. Or the different roles one person may fill (e.g. son, brother, father). One of the better ones I’ve heard is fire, which consists of the physical flame, light and heat.

But when we try to understand or explain God by comparing Him with something else, all examples can lead to a false understanding of God, and we are in danger of creating an idol, and God has ***“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”*** (Deuteronomy 5:8 NIV)

And so we must believe in God as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word, the Bible. And it is the Bible that presents God as three Persons in one.

Now the word “Trinity” does not appear anywhere in the Bible, but the concept is presented throughout the Bible—from beginning to end.

GOD IS PLURAL

To begin with, the Hebrew word translated “God” in Genesis 1:1, and throughout the Old Testament, is *Elohim*—which is the plural form of *elowahh*. That’s why Genesis 1:26 is translated, ***Then God said, “Let US make man in OUR image, in OUR likeness. . . .”***

Who was God speaking to when He said, “Let us”? He wasn’t speaking to the other creatures or angels; they don’t have creative powers so could not have been involved in the creative process.

And then in verse 2, we're told that, . . . ***the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and THE SPIRIT OF GOD was hovering over the waters.***

The *Spirit* is presented as distinctive from *God*. So the Spirit of God was there in the beginning too.

So in the first two verses of the Bible, two words are used to refer to GOD: *Elohim*, and *Ruah Elohim*, translated "the *Spirit* of God."

And then in Proverbs 8, we're introduced to another Person involved in creation. Beginning in verse 22, we read,

The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. (Proverbs 8:22-31 KJV)

While *Wisdom* is personified in Proverbs 8, the emotions of rejoicing and delight are mentioned which can only be applied to an actual person. And Paul says that Christ Jesus has become for us *wisdom from God* (1 Cor. 1:30).

But among several other verses in the Old Testament that clearly imply a plurality of persons in the Godhead, even a trinity, Isaiah 48:16 is especially intriguing:

"Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit. (Isaiah 48:16 NIV)

In it's context, God is speaking (in verse 12, He says, ***I am the first and I am the last.***) But then He speaks of ***the Sovereign LORD*** who has sent Him—along ***with his Spirit!***

So there are three “voices” in this passage:

- the One speaking (who is the *first and the last*, the One who *laid the foundations of the earth*, v.13), secondly,
- the Sovereign Lord (who sent the One speaking), and thirdly
- His Spirit

Then in the New Testament (where the concept of the Trinity is most clearly presented), the apostle Paul says of Jesus Christ, that

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him . . . (Colossians 1:15-20 NIV)

When Jesus was baptized, . . . ***a voice from heaven said, "This is my SON*** (Greek, *huios*), ***whom I love; with him I am well pleased.***" (Matthew 3:17 NIV) And Jesus referred to that “Voice” repeatedly as His “Father” (Greek *Pater*, pot-air’).

So the Bible presents God as *Elohim* (or “God” in the Hebrew), and then distinguishes between

- *Pater* (or “Father” in the Greek),
- *Ruah* (or “Spirit”), and
- *huios* (hwee-os’ or “Son” in the Greek).
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And yet it affirms over and over that there is only one God.

. . . for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:6 NIV)

There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6 NIV)

GOD'S IMAGE & LIKENESS IN HUMANKIND

Mankind, who was made in God's image and likeness, can be understood as consisting of three parts:

- the physical **body**,
- the **soul** (including the intellect and emotions), and
- the **spirit** (that which continues to exist after the physical body dies).

We can distinguish these three parts when God created humankind in Genesis 2:7: . . .

. the LORD God formed the man from the

- *DUST OF THE GROUND and breathed into his nostrils the*
- *BREATH OF LIFE, and the man became a*
- *LIVING BEING—or SOUL (K.J.V.)*. (Genesis 2:7 NIV)

The *dust of the ground* referring to the physical body,

The *breath of life* referring to the spirit (See John 20:22, ***And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."***), and

Living being or soul referring to the intellect & emotion.

When the physical body dies, ***Then man goes to his eternal home . . . and the dust [his physical body] returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*** (Ecc. 12:5,7)

And we can understand each "Person" of the godhead according to the way God relates to us . . .

- God, the Father, *in judgment causes the sense of sin and guilt;*
- God, the Son, *in atonement expiates sin and guilt;*
- God, the Spirit, *in regeneration and conversion removes sin and guilt.* (Frank, as quoted by Shedd, p. 223)

So why is this particular belief in one God eternally existent in three Persons so important?

First of all—and most importantly—it helps us to know God intimately for who He truly is. God has revealed Himself to us so that we might know Him—not just as the Supreme Being, but as our Father, as our elder Brother (see Jn. 20:17), and as our abiding *Parakletos* or Comforter—the Holy Spirit.

It also helps us to know ourselves; that is, it gives us a true picture of ourselves. We are creatures and not God. (Satan's temptation was we would be "like God." And we have bought it!) And we have violated the Image we were created to reflect. But God is restoring that image through the *redemptive* work of His Son and the *regenerating* work of His Spirit.

And so it helps us to see the reason for our existence: that we are participants in God's work of re-creation.

Conclusion

But it isn't enough to simply *believe* there is one God, even if we accept that He exists eternally in three Persons. As James wrote, ***You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.*** (James 2:19 NIV)

So how should this belief affect our lives?

The Scriptures exhort us, ***Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*** (Note the tripartite nature: heart [intellect & emotions], soul [spirit], strength [body]. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV)

So our *belief in* God should be accompanied by a *love for* God.

But we can only know Him so as to love Him if we know Him as the Bible presents Him. And the Bible presents God as love (1 Jn. 4:16). In fact, "***... God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*** (John 3:16 NIV)

And when we know *that* God, we can love Him because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:7-21)

And if we love God, we'll obey His commandments. (Jn. 14:15) And His commandment is to love one another. (Jn. 15:17)

Let's let Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple recorded in 1 Kings 8:56-61, be our closing prayer:

"Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people . . . just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses [and we would add, Jesus Christ].

May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers.

And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people . . . according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that THE LORD IS GOD AND THAT THERE IS NO OTHER. (1 Kings 8:56-61 NIV)