

The Troubled Trinity

sermon digest

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1 John 5:1-10

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Michael Servetus is the unofficial patron saint of the Unitarian faith with the unusual distinction of having been condemned by both the Catholic Inquisition and a Protestant court. In 1553, Michael Servetus was executed by burning, one of many victims of the established Church from the time of Constantine. He was executed for heresy, for denial of the orthodox teaching of the Church on the Trinity and for rejection of the authenticity of infant baptism. A Spanish humanist, Michael Servetus did not believe that the definition of God in three persons in the Council of Nicea of 325 was true to the scriptures, consistent with the faith of the early Church Fathers, or good theology. Furthermore, he taught that infant baptism was neither the teaching of scripture nor the practice of the early church. The Theodosian Code of 438 provided the death penalty on both counts. True, Servetus was not the first to die for departure from the language of the Nicene Creed, so, why is he remembered by history? What is his legacy?

The Council of Nicea was the brainchild of Emperor Constantine, called to settle the theological debate over the deity of Jesus threatening the doctrinal integrity of the Church and the peace of Constantine's Empire. A century later Theodosius II attempted to put a lid on theological debate by encoding the death penalty for Arian Christians who, like Michael Servetus, denied the Trinity. The Theodosian Code was also aimed at the Donatist heresy for questioning the authenticity of the original baptism of apostates who had denied the faith under Roman persecution. During the Reformation eleven centuries later, Michael Servetus was one of many voices raised to challenge established Church authority. He attracted the attention of the Inquisition with both his writings and his speeches. Theologians today label Servetus first Unitarian, unorthodox Trinitarian, or Arian Christian.

Having escaped arrest by the Catholic Inquisition in Vienna, he sought refuge with the Reformed Church in Geneva. In Geneva he was recognized in the audience of John Calvin's sermon and arrested. Already condemned to death by the Catholic Inquisition, Servetus was tried for heresy by Reformed Christians. Aided by testimony from John Calvin, he was condemned and burned at the stake. Michael Servetus stands apart from other martyrs of the time because he was the subject of agreement, without cooperation, between Catholic and Protestant authorities. His death at the hands of John Calvin, like Luther's lethal attack on the peasant revolt and Anabaptists, left a legacy of concern for Reformation Christians.

The troubled trinity has been grounded in controversy and combat for more than sixteen centuries. If the Theodosian Code were still in effect, I wonder how many of us could avoid the fate of Michael Servetus? Thank God, Protestant and Catholic Christians eventually withdrew from executions as the answer to disagreement in the church. Otherwise, most of our churches would need a gallows in the front yard. I would add that the Trinity is not an exception to the rule that allows diversity in the church, and the only reason it has continued to be the litmus test of orthodoxy is that Emperor Theodosius II has not lost his influence.

The troubled trinity emerged in theological conflict. Is this the test of one's theological agility or a measure of one's ability to believe the incomprehensible? In 1963, Bishop John A.T. Robinson suggested the abandonment of much of our traditional language about God. He even suggested that we drop the word *God* until we have purged it of all misguided traditions. After a succinct description of the trinitarian controversy, George Hedley notes that the whole business about the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible has encouraged the sardonic remark that the whole matter is incomprehensible. Theologians as well as scientists have found trinitarian language to be difficult if not impossible to explain. One searches in vain for the word *trinity* in the Bible. Obviously the Old Testament contains no reference to a Triune God. Historians agree that the Trinity did not become the standard of orthodoxy until the Council of Nicea.

Our text today has a footnote with a disputed passage: "There are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one." Called "the Johannine Comma," the passage was added later in defense of Nicea and cannot be found in any Greek text before 1400. Some scholars find a similar explanation for the formula for baptism in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore

and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

God is shrouded in mystery. Figures, word pictures, and mental images are necessary tools in the attempt to proclaim the God we cannot see, hear, or hold. We are limited to word pictures of the God we cannot touch or see. The very instant we attempt to speak of God we are in over our heads. It seems that we have two choices here: we can mentally reduce God to our level of comprehension, or we can recognize that true worship always reaches beyond our grasp. The focus of worship is always beyond what and who we are. This has been the big obstacle in our conversation with people who work in science in Oak Ridge. The questions of faith go far beyond anything we can possibly boil down to scientific verification. As George Schweitzer reminded us a few weeks ago in the FRS gathering, both the “New Atheists” and the creationists make the same mistake of treating matters of faith as questions of science.

I have found myself forced to speak of the Trinity in working with children. The Three names—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are familiar to any child who has grown up in the church. It is often the cause of much confusion. We often encounter scrambled biblical chronology with children. They have difficulty in separating Paul from Moses or Jesus from God. Actually the idea of the Trinity was the product of chronology, of biblical history. The Bible begins with the God who rescued His People from bondage and continues to affirm this God as Lord of creation. Christians experienced God in Christ raising the child’s questions and confusion. Adults sometimes dismiss children with a sweep of the hand as if God were obvious or perfectly understood by everyone else. Often the child’s question is perfectly natural and obvious but totally outside the experience or education of the adult. Children deserve adult companions in the struggle to know God. We may not come with simple explanations, and we should not substitute theological stork stories for questions that cause us embarrassment.

John the Elder, author of 1 John, draws from the deep well of Christian experience. God is not a thing to be managed or defined. To simply describe the Eternal in human terms may be the best we can do, and we always fall short of exhausting the mystery of God with mere words. The Trinity emerged in early Christianity with the most obvious question about Jesus, the man who seemed to be a window to the reality of God. First Christians called him Immanuel, God with us, the Word become flesh.

Our Grace Covenant focuses on the central teaching of 1 John, “God is love,” not on the Nicene Creed. For John, God is personal being, the very personification of love. If God were neither personal nor loving, the idea of God in human thought is more of a problem than a comfort. God reflected in the person of Christ, one man in one place at one time in history, gets very close to our humanity. The Gospels are consistent with the Elder’s affirmation “God is love.” We are certainly not in the business of counting gods as accused by Muslims and Jews, yet the Christian understanding of God does flow from experience in history.

God meets us in our worst fears and deepest need. After affirming the love that ties us to God and to one another, John the Elder speaks of three witnesses—the Spirit, the water, and the blood. The unseen presence of the Spirit of God was apparent to John in the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist. Both sacraments focus on the death of Jesus.

I think that we can agree that the Trinity is not a cause for killing fields, as it has sometimes been in Christian history, but it is tied to the experience of Christians with the death of Jesus. Jürgen Moltmann centers understanding of the Trinity in the cross. It is pictured by a variety of artists in medieval Christian art in the *Gnadenstuhl*, the Mercy Seat. God meets us at the point of our greatest fear and highest need, the point of death. The cross is not just about the death of the man Jesus. It is about death itself. It reveals God’s presence even in death even before the hope of the resurrection. Moltmann writes:

God the Father, with an expression of deep sorrow on his face, holds the crossbar of the cross from which his dead son hangs. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends from the Father onto the Son. Where in many paintings of this sort the eucharistic chalice stands in the midpoint of the three persons, here the cross stands in the middle of the triune God. It is the breathtaking image of Easter Saturday, after Christ was killed, but before his resurrection for the redemption

of the world by the life-giving Spirit. This image of the Trinity can thus rightly be called “Pain of God” or the “Death of God.”

—Jurgen Moltmann, *The Living Pulpit*, Ap-Jn, 1999