

Believe It:
The Godhead

Are you ready for a challenge this morning? John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church wrote, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.”

One of the early church fathers, Augustine wrote, “If you deny the trinity you lose your soul, if you try to explain it lose your mind.”

Well here goes. I haven’t run into any really smart worms lately and I can’t afford to loose any more of my mind but I would like us to try to wrestle with the absolutely crucial doctrine of the Trinity.

Last week we launched a new series we’re calling *Believe It*.

What we’re doing is use FCC’s statement of faith as our guide. We want to go through it step by step with a goal in mind. When we’re finished we want every person who’s part of this congregation to be able to explain what they believe and why they believe it.

The goal is to answer questions like: What do we as Christians believe? Why do we as Christians believe what we believe? And what difference does it make to our everyday lives?

Last week we started with we started with point one in our Articles of Faith, *The Holy Scriptures*. Here’s what we say: “The Bible in its original documents is the inspired Word of God, the written record of His supernatural revelation of Himself to man, absolute in its authority, complete in its revelation, final in its content, and without error in its statements.”

That first point is absolutely crucial because all other points grow out of that one. It’s because we have a trustworthy book that we can know about the trinity, salvation, eternal security, the Holy Spirit, and future events.

We saw last week that the Bible makes audacious claims about itself and then backs up those claims. If you missed last week’s message, please check it out on the church web site. Everything else we say in the coming weeks hinges on the validity of the Bible.

The Bible is the only religious book that contains the truth of the Trinity. Other books may try to explain what the Bible means by the Trinity, but no other religious book has ever proposed the concept.

That's because the Trinity isn't something anybody would just dream up on their own. It's like the biblical message of the almighty Creator who is also the humble Savior. There are certain teachings you only find in the Holy Scriptures and not anywhere else because it takes God's revelation to make them known.

So let's dive in today with point 2 in our Statement of Faith: "**The Godhead.** There is one God who is eternally existent, creator of the heaven and earth, manifested in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; co-existent in power and glory and executing distinct yet harmonious duties in the work of redemption."

Last week we talked some about our trip to the Middle East and the discussions we had with Muslims about the Bible. One of their most misunderstood areas of biblical teaching was on this subject of the trinity.

The creed of Islam, the *shahada*, starts off "There is no God but God..." In other words there is only one God. As soon as we talk about the Father, Son, and Spirit the Muslim mind hears "Three gods," which of course is total blasphemy in Islam and Christianity.

I. Christians Believe That There Is One God

Understand this: your life attitudes and actions are determined by your view of God. Who ever you are, whatever your view of what God is or isn't, shapes how you think, speak, and act.

When we talk theology, we're not just talking theoretically. When we unpack theological concepts we get into the very underpinnings of life.

You may not believe that, but it's true.

If you don't believe there's a God, it's going to impact your life. We all have systems of morality we live by. An atheist obviously isn't going to base his moral decisions on a religious book.

Of course the problem becomes, what do we use for our standard of morality? If there is no Lawgiver or a universal standard then we have to use whatever makes sense to us at the time.

In 1963 Baltimore's own Madalyn Murray O'Hair was the plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court ruling banning prayer and Bible reading from the public schools.

Justice Potter Stewart, the one dissenting vote blasted the ruling saying, "It led not to true neutrality with respect to religion, but to the establishment of a religion of secularism."

That 1963 case has been repeatedly cited in other court cases to show that religion can never be a factor in American jurisprudence. The total state of confusion in our courts today on almost every moral issue grows out of the fact that we've mistakenly ruled that the constitution effectively bans God's teaching from all decisions.

What we believe about God matters tremendously.

If I believe that God rewards religious people then I'm going to get into my religion, whatever that happens to be. If I'm a pantheist I treat the world as God.

If I'm a polytheist I acknowledge lots of gods and probably pick and choose my morality.

If I believe that God's just an all loving, benevolent grandfather in the sky I won't worry at all about morality.

What I believe about God impacts my life choices.

Turn to Deuteronomy 6 page 178

The Bible clearly teaches that there is a God, He's the Almighty, Holy Creator, and He is one. Here's what the Bible says.

Read verses 4, 5

This is the Shema, from the first word. *Sh'ma Yisrael* Observant Jews consider the Shema to be the most important part of the prayer service in Judaism, and its twice-daily recitation as a *mitzvah* (religious commandment). It is traditional for Jews to say the Shema as their last words, and for parents to teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night.

The Bible is unhesitatingly monotheistic.

Deuteronomy 4:35: *The Lord is God. There is no other besides him.* Deuteronomy 32:39, God says, *There is no God beside me.* Psalm 86:10: *You alone are God.* Isaiah 43:10, God says, *Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be after me.*

Isaiah 45:5 says, *I am the Lord – this is God. There is no other. Besides me there is no God.* I Timothy 1:17, the New Testament says that God is *the King of the Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God.* I Timothy 2:5 couldn't be more clear. *There is one God.*

That's it. One God.

By the way, the sociological teaching that says all people were originally polytheistic and religion later evolved into monotheism never read Genesis chapter 1. Polytheism is a devolution of religion.

I. Christians Believe That There Is One God

II. Christians Believe That One God Is Manifested In Three Persons

Have you ever heard people say doctrine isn't really important? Doctrine divides. We just preach Jesus?

You can't preach about Jesus unless you have a biblical Christology, which is a correct belief system about Jesus. All the Bible is profitable for doctrine.

Here's how dangerous it gets when we try to ignore doctrine. Joel Osteen is one of the most popular preachers on TV. His books have sold millions of copies. He wants to be encouraging to people who are down and that's a good thing. But he says that Bible doctrine really isn't that important.

Here's a quote: "I believe that [Mormons] are Christians. . . . I don't know if it's the purest form of Christianity, like I grew up with. But you know what, I know Mormons, I hear Mitt Romney—and I've never met him—but I hear him say, 'I believe Jesus is the Son of God,' 'I believe he's my savior,' and that's one of the core issues." "I'm sure there are other issues that we don't agree on. But you know, I can say that the Baptists and the Methodists and the Catholics don't all agree on everything. So that would be my take on it."

Since we're talking about the trinity I believe it's important to establish that Mormons say there is no trinity in the sense of historic Christianity.

Mormonism clearly teaches that God the Father was once a man, but became God. He has a physical body, as does his wife (the Heavenly Mother). Mormons deny the trinity, arguing that the Father, Son and Spirit are three separate gods. Mormons teach that it is possible for all faithful Mormons to one day become gods too. Mormonism teaches that Jesus is a separate god from the Father (Elohim) and is the spirit child of the Father and Mother in heaven.

I don't say all of that to start a "Let's slam Mormonism" movement but to say that doctrine matters big time. Without sound doctrine we're left with personal opinion. Listen to some of these biblical challenges.

*Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. (I Timothy 4:13)
And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. (Ephesians 4:11,12,14)*

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine. (II Timothy

3:16)

The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine. (II Timothy 4:3)

Doctrine isn't some stuffy, mundane, lifeless bunch of meaningless points for seminary professors to argue over. It's the very essence of truth. It's about who God is, who we are, how to know God, and how to have eternal life. There is no more important discussion that we could ever have than biblical doctrine.

One of the things my anti-Trinitarian friends (like Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslims) like to point out is that the word "Trinity" isn't even found in the Bible, to which I respond, "Either is the word 'Bible' in the Bible. It isn't the descriptive term that proves anything, it's the biblical teaching that matters.

Now when you read the writings of the early church fathers you can see that they really worked at wording the biblical teaching correctly. They didn't want to say there were three Gods.

They didn't want to say there was one God who sometimes showed up as Father and sometimes Son or Holy Spirit.

There was a lot of healthy debate because there really is no human equivalent or illustration that fully explains the Trinity. This is biblical revelation.

Tertullian, a Latin theologian who wrote in the early 3rd century, is credited with using the words "Trinity", "person" and "substance" to explain that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "one in essence—not one in Person."

It's why we say, "Manifested in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; co-existent in power and glory."

Turn to Genesis 1 page 1

Read verse 26, 27

A couple of things to note. First the Hebrew word translated "God," *elohiym* is the plural form of *el*. Hebrew has singular (meaning one), dual (meaning 2), and plural (meaning 3 or more). That doesn't explicitly prove the Trinity but it's certainly implicit in the word.

But the second of all God says, *Let us make man in our own image...* Who's He talking to? Not the angels. We're not made in the image of angels and angels aren't made in the image of God. I'll give you a hint, there aren't any other options. This was discussion among members of the Trinity.

After man sinned in Genesis 3 it says, *Then the LORD God said, Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.* (Genesis 3:22)

At the tower of Babel God said, *Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.* (Genesis 11:6) That's the origin of Alabama and Massachusetts accents.

I believe these are clear references to the members of the trinity.

Turn to Isaiah 9 page 674

Read verse 6

You'll recognize this verse from the Christmas season. It's the heart of Handel's Messiah. A child is born who's called the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. What's that about?

Turn to John 1 page 1041

Read verses 1-3 & 14

Our Muslim friends in the Middle East said, "Was He with God or was He God? That doesn't make sense."

My reply to that is, "That's my whole point. It doesn't make sense. We're talking about God. If I could put God in a box and fully understand Him, He wouldn't be any greater than I am. Do you really want a God who's no greater than I am? I sure don't!"

I'm already stuck with my god-like delusions of grandeur. I already think, "I can run the show. I'm the center of everything." I'm doing all I can to get out of the God business. That's what spiritual growth is all about.

As John the Baptist said, *He must increase, but I must decrease.* (John 3:30)

So you've got The Father, you've got The Son, now add to that The Holy Spirit. Here's some things the Bible says about the Spirit: He gives eternal life. He gives grace. He is eternal. He is holy. He is the Creator. He is the Truth. He raises the dead. He accepts our worship.

Sounds a whole lot like God doesn't it?

I. Christians Believe That There Is One God

II. Christians Believe That One God Is Manifested In Three Persons

III. Christians Believe The Three Persons Have Different Functions

In our statement of faith we said, "executing distinct yet harmonious duties in the work of

redemption.”

The old theologians distinguished between the economic and the imminent trinity. The imminent Trinity is how God is within himself. The economic Trinity is how God works in history.

When it comes to our salvation, we can see the economic Trinity.

We can see that God is one, and that God, the Father, Son, and Spirit, always work in harmony and unison. They work together, but each One has a role to play in various things that they are accomplishing. The whole Trinity’s involved in our salvation.

Turn to Titus 3 page 1171

Here’s each member of the trinity playing His part in our salvation.

Read verses 3-7

God's plan of salvation is all here in these few verses. It explains what moved God to save us - his kindness, love, and mercy.

We get so wrapped up in ourselves. It’s really tough for us to understand that not only don’t we deserve God’s kindness, we deserve just the opposite.

Because of our sin, the righteous God of Creation would be completely just in wiping us off the face of the Earth. The only thing we deserve from Him is His wrath.

The Bible says: Isaiah 5:16 *But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God who is holy shall be hallowed in righteousness.*

It says the angels around His throne cry out: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!* (Isaiah 6:3)

God is holy in the purest sense of that word. And out of His holiness comes a sacred hatred for sin.

That means that our sin is in the focal point of His judgment. The Bible says, *Our God is a consuming fire.* (Hebrews 12:29)

But here’s the astonishing part, in the wonder of grace, God aimed all His wrath at sin at His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. The searing wrath of God’s awesome judgment didn’t come down on the ones who deserve every bit of it.

His judgment came crashing down on Jesus at the cross.

God did all of that to glorify His own name for all eternity. God used the cross to

demonstrate His character once for all to men and angels.

Out of the cross comes our forgiveness. In grace God forgives us, not by works we do, but by Christ's once-for-all work at the cross.

The word that the Bible uses for "love" in verse 4 is *philanthropia*. It's a compound of *philos*, which means "love," and *anthropos*, which means "man."

That's a pretty interesting way of thinking about God, isn't it? He's the ultimate philanthropist. The dictionary defines "philanthropist" as "A person who seeks to promote the welfare of others."

God not only provides for our welfare here on earth but cares for us beyond the grave. He does that through the forgiveness of sins that he gives us through his Son, Jesus.

How can we be certain that all these amazing blessings really belong to us? He saved us through the washing of regeneration, which means rebirth, and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Each member of the Trinity works together with the others.

Here's where it really gets exciting! We can be certain that forgiveness, eternal life, and confidence for this life are ours because we have the promise of God.

Verse 7 we're justified by His grace. The word "justified," *dikaioo*, is a legal term used in the courts of Rome to mean, "pronounced not guilty."

We tend to think of ourselves as pardoned sinners. You know, guilty but set free. But the word "pardon" isn't even used in the New Testament.

God doesn't say, "You're guilty but I'm letting you go." He declares us not guilty and out of that we become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

And notice the word "hope" here is a noun not a verb. We don't hope we're going to live forever with the Lord, we have a hope. In other words we're sure. We have confidence.

Jay Adams writes, "Living in light of the hope of an eternity with Christ, where all wrongs will be righted, where all suffering will be ended, and where all doubts, fears, and tears will be banished, makes a great difference in how one chooses to respond to problems in the present. That focus on the future is altogether important. One who anticipates inheriting a fortune in the future lives differently today than the one who has no such hope."

“The believer is heir to eternal life! Reemphasizing this to people who are struggling - especially when they have their nose pressed hard against the present - can make all the difference in how one responds to difficulties, losses, and trials.”

Is the doctrine of the Trinity really that important?

Mark Driscoll out at Mars Hill Church preached a message on the Trinity lately and he wrapped it up so well I thought, if you can't improve, plagiarize. Actually, I want to give credit where credit is due so let me just share some of his application points:

1. The Trinitarian life is loving. We have all kinds of unusual definitions for love. God demonstrated His love through the perfect Trinitarian formula. We see a model of perfect love in the members of the Trinity and how that spills over to us in Christ.

2. The Trinitarian life is communal.

Before sin entered the world there was only one thing God said was not good...loneliness. God intends there to be relationship and connection because that's who God is by nature. God is a loving relational community in Himself, that's why we long for relationships.

3. The Trinitarian life is transparent. There's nothing to hide between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For those of us who are sinners, it means we're to be open and honest about our sin, and our folly, and our fear, and our failure, and our hopes, and our longings, and our dreams, and our expectations, and our struggles, and our doubts. We're honest. We're transparent because that's Trinitarian.

4. The Trinitarian life is humble. Think about this: there's never been a day when Jesus was jealous of the glory and honor and praise that was being lavished upon the Father. There's never a day when the name of Jesus is preached and worshiped that the Spirit stands back and covets that glory. God is altogether humble. The Father, Son, and Spirit, live for the well-being of the other. They live to honor, to glorify, to cherish, to serve, to exalt one another. That's our example.

These were all fascinating applications but the last is one I never thought of in quite this way.

5. The Trinitarian life is filled with joy. Between the Father, Son, and Spirit there is nothing but unprecedented, unparalleled joy. Here's why. There's no sin. There's no jealousy. There's no conflict. There's no disrespect. There's no lying. There's no hiding. There's no blaming.

There's just love: perfect love, perfect unity, perfect communication, perfect affection, perfect adoration, perfect connection. God is the most joyful person who has ever, or will ever, exist.

Are you living a Trinitarian life this morning? God said, *Let us make man in our image.*
(Genesis 1:27)

When your kids, your spouse, your friends, your neighbors, your classmates look at you, do they see a Trinitarian image reflected back? Not a perfect image. We're not there yet. But do they see something different and unique that can only be a likeness of the godhead, three in one?