

Hy 5:1
Hy 6 (Athanasian Creed)
Hy 3:1,2,3
Ps 73:8
Hy 2:1,2
John 3:1-21
Lord's Day 8

Yarrow, December 6, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We said last week with Lord's Day 7 that only those are saved who believe; *faith* is absolutely necessary for salvation. So we took a moment last week to describe what faith was. Faith, we said, was accepting that God exists, and then taking this God seriously. That's why you can't separate faith from obedience.

But saying all of that raises the next question. If faith involves accepting that God exists, *who is this God?* That question is important, for there are all kinds of perceptions out there about who God is. Ask the average Canadian whether he believes there is a God, and you'll find that the vast majority answers the question with Yes. But now ask the next question: what do you mean by God? And you'll get all kinds of answers. That's why it's important that the church confess straightaway who the God is in whom one must believe to be saved. And that's Lord's Day 8. Here the catechism describes the God in whom one must believe as Triune, three in One. More precisely, here *we*—who live in modern-day Canada—confess the only true God to be Triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I intend this afternoon first to try to lay before you something of what society understands by the term 'God'. Then I want to turn to the Scriptures to learn from there what the God of heaven and earth has said about Himself. That will in turn provide material of encouragement and instruction for us in our modern world.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IS TRIUNE.

1. Two modern concepts of God.
2. Three distinct Persons are one God.
3. One glorious identity of God.

1. Two modern concepts of God.

It seems to me, congregation, that Canada's media reflects primarily two concepts of god. The first is based on evolution, and has slowly become the accepted way in which our culture looks at God. The second jumped into its own because of developments in the Middle East, and is really the Muslim way of looking at God – a way that the media tends to confuse with the God of the Bible. We look first at the evolution concept of God.

Evolution

The second half of the last century has seen the people of the street adopt the evolution theory as the true explanation of where life comes from. You will know the theory: billions of years ago an inexplicable Big Bang began the universe. In the course of millions of years

molecules somehow got together in such a form as to be called life, and this early life evolved and changed with the circumstances and the climate to form the various life forms we see around us today, ourselves included. This teaching has no room for a God in heaven who either created the world in the beginning or upholds the world today. All there is to existence is what science can tabulate.

But evolutionists have had to recognize that tribes and nations have a religion, and in their religion they have deities. The pressing question is: if there is no God in heaven who revealed Himself to man, how come man has religions, how come man worships deities? The answer runs as follows.

When primitive man first began to think, says the evolutionist philosopher, he noticed that if you stand outside in full view of this yellow thing in the sky, you get all warm on the side facing this yellow thing. So: there must be a something in this sun, an unexplainable energy. Or: early man noticed that the fields were brown after a cold winter, then it warmed up, and after some days the fields turned green. So: there must be a something in the warmth, an unexplainable energy that makes things grow. Or: early man once witnessed a storm, saw an enormous flash of lightning, heard an awful lot of noise, and then noticed that yonder tree was split in half. Conclusion: there must be an energy, a force in the thunder, and this time it's not a friendly force but something to be scared of. So –says the evolutionist philosopher– primitive man got to thinking that this energy out there was a *living force* (they didn't have the science to learn that it's just the way of nature). Once the thought arose that this energy was a living force, early man developed the concept of this force being satisfied with you or being angry with you. So there developed a sense of duty in primitive man: man should do things to keep this force happy, lest that force send you a terrible thunderstorm to scare the daylights out of you. Hence the notion of sacrifices, and of good or bad behavioural standards.

As time went on, this energy received a name. The Egyptians called him Ra, the Canaanites called him Baal, the people of Israel called him Yahweh, the natives of North America called him the Great Spirit, and so on. As to how to keep this Force happy, well, different cultures developed different sacrifices and liturgies and feasts and dances.... So speaks the evolutionist philosopher.

From this line of thinking, brothers and sisters, a number of conclusions follow quite logically. In the first place, everybody serves the same god (whether they realize it or not). This God is not the almighty Creator who revealed Himself from heaven in Holy Scripture; this god is rather that Energy people have noticed in the world around them and given their different names. This god is not real in the sense that he actually exists, because science can today show how the sun has energy, how the warmth makes the grass grow, etc. Instead, this god is real *in the minds of the people*, and *they* have developed ways of worshiping their understanding of this Energy – ways others should respect. That's the second conclusion: there is no right way or wrong way to serve this Energy, this Deity, this God. People who live in the desert do it differently than people who live in the bush, and that's OK because they experience this god differently. People of aboriginal background do it differently than people of European background, and that's OK too because their understanding of this Energy and so their way of worshiping this Energy is culturally determined. So there's a third conclusion: now that people from England and from Thailand, from India and from Lebanon, from Iran and from the Congo all live together in one society called *Canadian*, we should respect each other's traditions – and therefore not criticize each other's theologies or ways of serving our god. Instead, we should celebrate what binds us

together (we all worship the same Energy) and at the same time celebrate our differences (we all worship the one Energy differently). So we should celebrate interfaith services....

Ask now your average Canadian whether he believes in God. Most will say Yes, they believe there is a God. But ask for details, and you'll find this evolutionary concept forming the beliefs of so many of our fellow citizens. We need to live in this land, and we need to know what's around us.

There is another concept of God that needs our attention, and that's the concept of Islam.

Islam

Ever since the Muslim faith was catapulted to center stage on that unforgettable September 11, the Muslim concept of God has also received more attention. This Muslim concept of God comes so very much closer to that of the Bible than the evolutionary concept, because the Muslim concept takes God for real, that is, Islam insists that God is there in reality and not just in people's minds. In fact, Allah is the Creator of the world, and upholds the world day by day. That sounds very similar to the teaching of the Bible, and that's also why Allah and God tend to get mixed up in people's thinking as if Allah is the God of the Bible.

But he's not. The Koran –that's the Muslim bible– presents Allah as exalted in the heavens, sovereign and majestic. The Koran also says that Allah is merciful, compassionate, vengeful, just – all attributes we also recognize from the Scriptures as true of the Lord. But in reality Allah's mercy and compassion have no function; Allah is instead the sovereign deity who coldly insists on obedience from every person on earth. There is no gospel that people have to believe; they need only accept that Allah is god and Allah is one (and Mohammed is his prophet), and so obey Allah in every aspect of life. It is by acknowledging Allah (through your deeds) that you earn his favour and so receive a place in heaven.

That thought also supplies, congregation, the explanation for September 11, as well as today's suicide bombers in the Middle East. For Allah cannot stand those who do not acknowledge him, and so his opponents need to be destroyed. That's specifically (Christian) America and all those in the Middle East who extend some support to America. That pleases Allah, and so earns you a favoured place in heaven. If in the process thousands die, that's just the way it is; on that Allah is cold, unmoved – as long as he is acknowledged.

There you have, brothers and sisters, two very different concepts of God found in our society today. In that climate you confess in Lord's Day 7 that to be saved you must believe in God. But: do either of these concepts agree with what the Lord has revealed? *What sort of God* must you take seriously? That brings us to our second point:

2. Three distinct Persons are one God.

In Lord's Day 8 we repeat after God what we have heard Him say about Himself in the Bible. We say: this one God is three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To draw out that three distinct Persons are one true and eternal God I draw your attention to the passage we read from John 3.¹

The passage tells us of Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus one night. This ruler of the Jews comes with a compliment for the preacher from the Galilean back-woods, and says: "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs You do unless God is

¹ JI Packer, "The Trinity and the Gospel" in *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), pg 1ff.

with Him" (vs 2). That was a nice thing for Nicodemus to say, and no doubt was designed to stroke Jesus the right way. But Jesus wasn't to be sidetracked from His heavenly mission by such compliments, and so He changed the topic to lay before Nicodemus the conditions for salvation. "Most assuredly," He said, "I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (vs 3). And since that sentence went straight over Nicodemus' head, Jesus elaborated in vs 5: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

What's intriguing now, brothers and sisters, is that this last verse is the first of a series of texts in the gospel of John where the three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned together in one sentence. Jesus speaks of 'I': "I say to you." This 'I', of course, is Jesus, the One described earlier in this gospel as the Word who was with God, yes, who *is* God, and has become flesh, the "only begotten of the Father" (Jn 1:1ff, 14). Jesus speaks of "the Spirit", and that's of course the Holy Spirit through whose power one must be born again if one wishes to enter the kingdom of God. And there's the third Person, God to whom belongs the kingdom Jesus announces, and that, we realize, is the Father. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Jesus mentions all three in the same breath when He impresses on Nicodemus the need to be born again.

In the verses that follow vs 5, Jesus takes the opportunity to expand for Nicodemus' sake what He said in vs 5. In the process Jesus also unfolds how the three Persons of the Godhead work together to obtain salvation for sinners. He speaks first of the work of the Holy Spirit (vss 6-10). The rebirth that's required is not a matter of entering again into Mom's womb and being born again as happened in infancy; the rebirth that's required is instead a miracle mysteriously worked by the Holy Spirit. In vs 10 Jesus says that He expected Nicodemus, "a teacher in Israel", to know these things, and so it follows that what Jesus says about the rebirthing work of the Holy Spirit was already taught in the Old Testament. Amongst the various Old Testament passages behind this text is also Ezekiel 11, where the Lord promises to give His people one heart and a new spirit; He'll "take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them" (vss 19f; cf 36:25ff). Sinners are changed so radically that their change boils down to a rebirth, a totally fresh start to one's life – and that's the work of God the Holy Spirit.

This was material, Nicodemus had said in vs 9, that stumped him and his fellow teachers in Jerusalem. "How," he asked, "can these things be?" In His reply Jesus says in vs 11: "We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you² do not receive Our witness." Notice Jesus' use of the plural pronoun 'we'; "We speak what *We* know..., and you do not receive *Our* witness." Who is Jesus referring to? He explains it in vs 13: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." In fact, vs 16, "God [the Father] so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish." This only begotten Son who came down from heaven is Jesus Himself, and on earth He testifies accurately to the things He has seen in heaven. That's why the plural pronoun in vs 11: God the Father is speaking through and with God the Son. Jesus' work and the Father's work are in step, are the same, and that's because He and the Father are one (cf 10:30; 17:11,21ff). That's why it's so imperative that Nicodemus and the other rulers of the Jews listen to what this Messenger-sent-from-God has to say about the kingdom of heaven and what it takes to be saved.

Before we condemn the Jewish leaders for not listening to the Messenger God sent, we should ask ourselves whether we are any wiser than they on this point. For in our chapter Jesus is

² Plural, referring not to Nicodemus alone, but also to his fellow teachers in Jerusalem.

also teaching *us* spiritual things, telling us how imperative it is that we are born again. So, will we let Him teach us the way into God's kingdom? The question is important because Jesus expands on what it takes to be saved, and says that the Son of Man whom the Father sent to earth must be "lifted up" even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. The point of the serpent Moses lifted up was that every Israelite bitten in the snake-plague God sent could look at the serpent and so be healed, saved. Jesus must be lifted up, crucified, so that every sinner can look at Him, believe in Him, and so be forgiven of sin, saved.

What we have here in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus? Jesus, brothers and sisters, lays out the way of salvation, yes. But that way of salvation is inextricably interwoven with the reality of the Trinity! The way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one must be born again – and that's the work of the Holy Spirit. Delete the Holy Spirit, then, and you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Similarly, the way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one look to the crucified Jesus as Israel looked to the serpent on Moses' staff, believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Delete the Son, and you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Once more, the way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one acknowledge the work of God the Father as the one who speaks through the Son, indeed, as the One who sent His only Son to earth (3:16). Delete the Father, and you cannot enter the kingdom of God because you deny that it was He who opened the door for you by sending His only dear Son to earth in the first place. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: all three have their own separate contribution to your salvation; deny any and you have lost salvation itself. That's the burden of Jesus' message to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

One could, of course, argue that the work of the three Persons does not necessarily mean that the three are one God; one could see them as three separate Beings who work closely together. Now, there are various texts of Scripture that leave no room for that interpretation, and the footnotes in our Lord's Day lists a long row of them. But aside from such texts as that, congregation, consider this thought. If the three Persons worked separately, even as three Friends, what guarantee do you have that Each is satisfied with the work of the Other, and accepts it with no questions asked? We realize: if you separate the three as separate Beings, all with perfect standards, you have undermined one source of comfort for the Christian. As it is, any sinner chosen by the Father for life eternal is *guaranteed* redeemed by the Son, for the Father and the Son are one. So too, any sinner redeemed by the Son is *guaranteed* renewed by the Spirit, for the Son and the Spirit are one also. And the Father most certainly receives those whom the Spirit has renewed, for the Spirit and the Father are one also. "These three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God," and the three together make the way of salvation.

So we're left with our third point:

3. One glorious identity of God.

The unity of the three Persons has within it a glorious gospel. The Son has been with the Father in the glory of heaven from eternity, not as a stranger to the Father or even as a Friend, but –says the Scripture– "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18). This notion of 'bosom' captures the closeness of Father and Son, and echoes the love that is caught in the term 'only begotten'. One Son the Father has, and this Son is so close to the Father as to be called His "beloved", "in whom [the Father is] well-pleased" (cf Mt 3:17; 17:5).³

It is, brothers and sisters, this closeness of Father and Son –the two are one– that makes the gospel of salvation so absolutely glorious. For see, despite the love, the oneness between the

³ Cf David J Engelsma, "The Holy Family: God as Truly Three" in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol 33, no. 2, April 2000, pg 24f.

Father and the Son-of-His-bosom, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). That is: so deep was God's love for sinners, so moved was He with compassion on account of the misery into which we had plunged ourselves, that the Father sent His "only begotten", dearly beloved Son-of-His-bosom out of His glorious company and into the misery of the fallen world (cf I Jn 4:17ff) – why?– to save sinners from the wrath of God, to reconcile to Himself those who broke the covenant God established with mortal man! That God would send a messenger from heaven to save sinners is one thing; that God would send *His only Son*, true God with the Father and the Spirit, away from His own bosom to the anguish of the cross – *that*, beloved, points up as nothing else does how compassionate the God of the Bible is, how dearly He loves the people He's chosen to life eternal! It's specifically the doctrine of the Trinity that opens up the vistas onto this glorious identity of the God of the Bible. That *such* a God is your God and mine: how delightfully comforting, how wondrously glorious! No wonder the Christian learns what love is!

But then it's clear too, congregation, that this God is a far cry from the god of the Muslims. Sure, the Muslims speak of their god as merciful and gracious. But such terms as 'mercy' and 'grace' do not *characterize* Allah nor Allah's actions. That's because Allah knows not what love is, for Allah was not touched in the pit of his stomach by the misery into which man plunged himself – and gave no Son to pay for sin nor any Holy Spirit to renew redeemed sinners. So Allah shows no compassion to sinners. Allah wants obedience, simple obedience. That is why the devote Muslim and the true Christian have such radically different behaviour. The devout Muslim will kill the infidel, regardless of cost in human suffering; he hasn't a clue what love is because his god knows not what love is. But the devout Christian will give, possibly even his life, to benefit the other; he's tasted the love of God in Jesus Christ and has been renewed through the Spirit of this God, and so he loves even his enemy. That in turn is why the Middle East will find no peace without the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the renewal of hearts through the Holy Spirit. Muslims need to learn what the love of God is, a love so wondrously displayed in the Trinity.

This God is also such a far cry from the God the believers of evolution talk about. Their god is not real, and therefore does not love. That is why in turn those who believe in this sort of a god have difficulty with true love, with emptying the self for the benefit of the other. Our society condones abortion and euthanasia, drunkenness and shooting drugs, counselling and empathy, and all of that comes from being busy with the self, about keeping the self happy and prosperous. But love as Triune God displayed it in His three-Person work for sinners' salvation is so very, very different; that is not self-love but self-emptying for the benefit of the other – unworthy though he be. What the evolutionist needs is the gospel of God's love, of how the Father was so moved with compassion at the misery of man that He gave His only begotten Son, and that Son gave up His life to reconcile the unworthy to the Father, and the Spirit seals that love through His renewing work....

And from whom, brothers and sisters, will the Muslim and the evolutionist, indeed all of society, learn what love really is? That can only be from those who know the identity of God, who have tasted His love for the unworthy –so deep that Triune God emptied Himself!– and so these believers *reflect that love* in the way they treat the neighbour. Reflect that love: *that* is how the believer shows that he knows the God of heaven and earth, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.