

X Marks The Spot

*³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
(Jude 1:3. ESV)*

¹⁷I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Unity And Diversity

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Deuteronomy 6:4

Matthew 3:16-17

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! We are at week 3 of a 14 week series called “X-Marks The Spot” in which we are exploring some of the real and seeming tensions within the immensity of God’s character and identity. This week we are talking about the Trinity. The word “Trinity” is a word that the church invented to describe the tension in Scripture between God’s essential unity and God’s personal diversity. Tri-meaning 3 and “unity” meaning 1. Three in One. Tri-unity. But how does the unity and diversity in God hold together? That is the discussion we want to have today.

Sometimes you will hear ignorant or uninformed people dismiss the concept of the Trinity by calling it an obvious contradiction. All that they reveal when they say that is that they have never studied the doctrine of the Trinity or that they did not pass first year philosophy in University because if they had then they would know the actual law of non-contradiction which states that A can never be A and nonA in the same object. Therefore the Trinity would be a contradiction if we were trying to say that God is three in essence and one in essence. Or the Trinity would be a contradiction if we were trying to say that God is one in person and three in person. But that is not what the doctrine of the Trinity is saying. The doctrine of the Trinity is saying that God is one in essence and three in person. That is not a contradiction, but as we shall see it is a mystery. It is a mystery because in our finite creatureliness we cannot grasp the fullness of that tension. There are things we can’t and shouldn’t say about the how of the Trinity, but the focus today is

on what we can say. The Bible actually says a lot of really helpful things about how these things hold together and it is to those things that we turn our attention now. We'll look at the Biblical witness to the unity and diversity of God and how those things ought to be understood in relation to each other and then we will conclude our time by making two necessary and timely applications of this truth. Next week we will return to this conversation to talk about two common and recurring heresies – we'll talk about how cults emerge from an effort to shrink this truth and remove the mystery by saying more or less than the Bible says and we'll talk about the necessity and the means of teaching this doctrine to our children. Let's begin then by looking at the Biblical witness to the essential unity of Almighty God.

The Unity Of God

Turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 6:4. The Scriptures from start to finish affirm the essential unity or oneness of God. We call this “monotheism” and we see it stated unambiguously in Deuteronomy 6:4:

⁴“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, **the LORD is one.** (Deuteronomy 6:4. ESV)

This is the “unity” in your Trinity. God is one. There numerous Scriptures that make this same point, we can't look at them all but here is a quick survey:

⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other, **besides me there is no God** (Isaiah 45:5. ESV)

In the New Testament this truth is equally affirmed:

there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6. ESV)

God is one. (Romans 3:30. ESV)

The essential unity or oneness of God is clearly taught in the Bible but what about the diversity within his person? Here we have a classic example of what theologians call progressive revelation. There are whispers and hints and strong anticipations of Trinitarian diversity from the very first chapter of the Bible that are developed and fleshed out and gain clarity over the course

of the unfolding story. Let me see if I can trace that development out for you briefly in the time that we have.

The Diversity In God

The Bible begins with these words:

¹In the beginning, **God** created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1. ESV)

In Hebrew the word that is used for God here is *elohim*. *Elohim* is a plural noun – in Hebrew words are commonly pluralized by adding the “*im*” ending; think *cherubim* and *seraphim* which are plural words for types of angels. But the plural noun *elohim* is always connected to singular verbs in the Hebrew Bible which is very confusing at first glance. It clearly doesn’t mean “gods” because we are told that God is one, not many. Why then the plural? It gets more complicated, look at Genesis 1:26:

²⁶Then God said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness. (Genesis 1:26. ESV)

In chapter 3:22 the Bible says:

²²Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become **like one of us** in knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3:22. ESV)

This strange way of speaking pops up again and again in the Old Testament nowhere more remarkably than in Isaiah 6:8:

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall **I** send, and who will go for **us**?” (Isaiah 6:8. ESV)

Here it seems that either there is a unity and a plurality in God or God just simply can’t speak Hebrew because if there is not some concept of Trinity in God then this is just really bad grammar. Whom shall **I** send, who will go for **US** – that is a strange sentence if God is not Trinity. Now some people will attempt to explain that by use of an 18th century English analogy. They will say: “Perhaps this is like the royal “we” used by the Queen. The Queen might say: “We solemnly declare” when it is obvious she is speaking only for herself.” That is true, the

Queen did do that BUT there is no example of that anywhere in Ancient Hebrew. To explain an ancient Hebrew anomaly by referencing an 18th century English oddity and potential imitation is more than a bit of a stretch.

There are also numerous places in the Old Testament where we see God spoken of in diverse and seemingly independent terms. For example as early as in Genesis 1 we have a reference to God's Spirit:

And **the Spirit of God** was hovering over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:2. ESV)

Then there are the many passages which speak of two persons simultaneously as the One God. Look for example at Psalm 45:

⁶ **Your throne, O God,** is forever and ever.

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;

⁷ you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you

with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;

⁸ your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. (Psalm 45:6-8. ESV)

So David is talking to God and saying that God, God's God has anointed him. That is strange language which clearly identifies two separate persons as God in the same sentence. If we had time we could look at another Psalm, Psalm 110 which does the same. In Psalm 45 we are not told who this other person is who can be called God but the author of Hebrews tells us that it is Jesus in Hebrews 1:8.

While it is true therefore that the Old Testament nowhere EXPLICITLY defines the diversity in God's personhood, at the very least these passages anticipate and prepare us for the more comprehensive treatment of this doctrine as we meet it in the New Testament. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 3:16-17:

¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17. ESV)

Here we have all three persons of the Godhead operating in distinctly different ways in the same scene. The Son is getting baptized, the Spirit is descending like a dove and the Father is speaking

from heaven. But, you might object, this only proves that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all different, it doesn't prove that they are all equally God. That's true, with respect to this passage but the Gospels generally begin by asserting the Divinity of Jesus at the start and then seeking to prove that by means of the evidence they assemble in the ensuing narratives. For example, John begins his Gospel by saying:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:1-2. ESV)

We'll talk about what the JW's try to get this passage to mean next week, but anyone who can read Greek will tell you that John's point is unambiguous and clear. John is intentionally mimicking the opening words of the Bible in Genesis 1 and he is saying that Jesus, the Word of God in the flesh, was with God from the beginning and Jesus WAS God from the beginning. He was the agent of creation in Genesis 1 – he was part of all those “we” and “us” statements. WITH and WAS communicate deity and diversity. Jesus is God but in a way that indicates plurality. The divinity of Jesus is everywhere asserted in the Bible and in fact it is the opening thesis of John's Gospel and also the climactic conclusion. The climax of John's Gospel is in John 20 when Jesus shows himself alive after the crucifixion to Thomas, who doubted:

²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “**My Lord and my God!**” (John 20:27-28. ESV)

John then goes on to say that this has been his whole purpose in writing a Gospel, to get all of us doubters to the place where we can look at Jesus and say with Thomas “My Lord and my God!” That the New Testament affirms Jesus as fully God cannot be denied.

That the New Testament affirms the Holy Spirit as fully God also cannot be denied; consider for example Acts 5:3-4:

³But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie to the Holy Spirit** and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? You have **not lied to men but to God**.” (Acts 5:3-4. ESV)

To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is God and Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Father are all different. That is the witness of the Bible. God is one in respect to

his essence and three with respect to his personhood. There is unity in God and diversity but how in the world do we hold those truths together? Let's explore that tension.

Exploring The Tension

As I mentioned two weeks ago when our grandparents spoke of the seeming tension between God's Sovereignty and man's responsibility they did not try and reconcile that which Scripture does not reconcile. They didn't attempt to say more than Scripture says, they just laid the concepts out side by side, and drew a line around them. Inside that space, they said, is the orthodox understanding of God's Sovereignty and our responsibility. Similarly when the church has spoken of the Trinity, of how to simultaneously understand God's unity and diversity we have adopted a similar approach. We have affirmed with equal stridency two seemingly contradicting statements. God is 1 with respect to essence and 3 with respect to personhood. God is 1 and 3. There is unity and diversity in his essential identity. That we can say because that is what the Bible says. We mustn't say more or less than that. And so like our grandparents did with God's Sovereignty and human responsibility, the early church fathers and all orthodox Christians since have done with God's unity and diversity. We say what can be said and then we draw a line around the mystery.

Historically we have drawn this line by means of 7 statements or boundary markers. We've said: "If you want to have an orthodox understanding of the Trinity you cannot step on these lines. You have to believe that:

- 1. There is only one God**
- 2. The Father is God**
- 3. The Son is God**
- 4. The Holy Spirit is God**
- 5. The Father is not the Son**
- 6. The Son is not the Holy Spirit**
- 7. The Holy Spirit is not the Father**

If you believe all of those things then you are inside the circle of orthodoxy and mystery." Now it is not enough to agree simply with the first four statements, given the Scriptures we have

already read. If you were to stop there then you would not have said enough to ward off some of the heretical understandings of the Trinity that have been historically rejected. You see some people over the years have spoken of the Trinity in terms of appearance or activity. So they would say “Yes there is only one God and yes he appears or ACTS in different ways but these are merely different modes that he adopts as need arises.” This heresy, known as modalism, is alive and well in some extreme branches of Pentecostalism which we will talk about next week. People who have thought that way about the Trinity have attempted to explain their views by use of a simple analogy; they will say: “God is like a man who is simultaneously a farmer, a husband and the mayor of his town. He is one man with three distinct personas; so it is with God.” That sounds almost right doesn’t it? And yet that is not at all what the Bible teaches. If it was then the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane would be nonsense, the Baptismal scene at the Jordan would be incomprehensible and worst of all the atonement at Calvary would be ineffective. You see if the mayor and the farmer and the husband are really all the same man then the mayor could not send the farmer to die on a cross and the husband could not be sent by the mayor and the resurrected farmer to comfort the citizens of the town or to pray on their behalf. Modalism denies the reality of God’s inner diversity. It surrenders the idea of diversity in order to give itself fully to the doctrine of unity. To remain in this place of orthodoxy with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity you have to believe and uphold each of these seven place markers. All of these have been affirmed already by the various Scriptures we have read to show his diversity and unity but let me show you just one more that deals specifically with the last three statements. Look in your Bible at John 15:26; here we meet Jesus saying:

²⁶“But when **the Helper** comes, whom **I will send** to you **from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father**, he will bear witness about me. (John 15:26. ESV)

It is absolutely clear in this passage that Jesus was no modalist. The farmer cannot say: “The mayor will send and I will send the husband to you and he will bear witness to me the farmer” – because all three of those personas are in reality one person, but Jesus here is clearly speaking of differentiated persons within the one Almighty Godhead. The Holy Spirit is sent by the Son from the Father to the world in order to bear witness to the Son – that sentence involves all kinds of differentiation.

All Christians everywhere – Protestants, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Copts all affirm these seven statements as being true and in harmony with Holy Scripture:

1. **There is only one God**
2. **The Father is God**
3. **The Son is God**
4. **The Holy Spirit is God**
5. **The Father is not the Son**
6. **The Son is not the Holy Spirit**
7. **The Holy Spirit is not the Father**

God is one in essence and three in personhood. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Two Important Applications

Now before we go we need to apply this Biblical truth to two specific areas that are both under assault in our day and age. We don't come to church ONLY to learn about God, we come ALSO to learn what this God – who is one in essence and three in person - requires of us. God desires for us to RESPOND to his revealed character and two areas in particular are singled out in the Bible as being places where the Trinity has important application. The first area is the realm of Christian marriage.

1. Marriage

The Bible teaches that gender differentiation and marital unity are concepts derived from and reflective of the inner character of God.

^{26c}**Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.** ... ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; **male and female he created them.** (Genesis 1:26-27. ESV)

He then went on to say:

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24. ESV)

So a male and a female who are both different people come together in marriage as one flesh – the Hebrew word there is *bawsawr* which means “one self” or “one body” – and they will have children who go forth from them and do the same. This we are told in some way reflects the nature and likeness of Almighty God. This means – and I am not saying this to be entertaining or to make you laugh – this means that when a husband and a wife have sex they are literally worshipping God. They are intended by God to be learning something about the joy God takes in his own inner relationship. God loves himself – that is something we struggle to understand – but God delights in his own inner unity and diversity. When we have sex – when two people come together and delight in their unity – they are learning about God. When they send forth children, they are learning about God. Now the analogy is not perfect, we are not saying that God the Father and the Son give birth to the Holy Spirit, we mustn’t stretch these analogies too far, we are just noting that marriage is explicitly introduced in the Bible as being reflective of God’s inner unity and diversity. This is taught again in the New Testament. Paul says:

³But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife⁴ is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3. ESV)

Here Paul explicitly grounds his teaching on marriage in the doctrine of the Trinity. Very quickly then, what does Trinitarian marriage look like?

First of all it asserts the equal dignity of men and women. The Bible has always been revolutionary in this respect. The Bible made the equality of men and women a primary concern on page 1. In the image of God he created them, MALE and FEMALE he created them. My youngest daughter is named Noa – you’ve heard me mention that before. Noa is a Jewish name from the Old Testament Scriptures. It is the most popular Jewish name for girls in Israel because it reflects the high dignity the Bible assigns to women. Noa in Numbers 26 is the first woman in the Bible and perhaps in ancient history to inherit property. She is treated with equal rights under the law in Numbers 26 3500 years before women in North America were given the right to vote. The Bible has always been WAY ahead of the curve in terms of according women equal dignity and value as people created in the image of God. If you have a Trinitarian marriage then you will have a marriage of equals in terms of dignity and value.

Secondly if it is a Trinitarian marriage then there will be diversity. Your marriage will have one male and one female in it. The assault on gender and the assault on Biblical marriage is also an assault on the essential character of God – make no mistake about that – a Trinitarian marriage will understand that maleness and femaleness are DIFFERENT – gloriously so! It will delight in those differences rather than seeking to minimize them. Men will be men and women will be women and maintaining and CELEBRATING those differences will be understood as an act of worship.

Lastly if you have a Trinitarian marriage you will exhibit and delight in functional subordination and other exaltation. Let me unpack that. Look again at what the Apostle Paul says about marriage in 1 Corinthians 11:

³But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3. ESV)

Is Paul saying that the Son is less God than the Father? No –that would be a heresy and Paul is not a heretic. What Paul is saying is that inside the Trinity, where all three persons are EQUALLY GOD, members of the Trinity delight in functional subordination and other exaltation and so it should be in marriage. When we look at Jesus in the New Testament we see that he is fully God but we also see that he is constantly subordinating himself to the will of the Father.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. (John 5:19. ESV)

Jesus made it very clear in his preaching and in his praying that he had come to do the will of the Father – he delighted in being in submission to the Father. Similarly he said the Holy Spirit would delight in exalting the Son:

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴**He will glorify me.** because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-14. ESV)

So inside the Trinity we see equality, we see diversity and we see functional subordination and other exaltation. Paul says, it is this reality that explains male headship in the home and in the church. Male is not better than female in the home or church any more than Father is better than

Son in the Trinity but in a Trinitarian marriage the wife will submit to the husband with the same delight with which the Son submits to the Father.

Again, just like with the issue of homosexuality, from time to time we get asked why we make such a big deal of male headship in the home and church when nobody else seems to care anymore. The answer is because an assault on this doctrine is not just an assault on marriage, it is not just an assault on the church it is an assault on the essential character and identity of God. The character of God would tell us that equal and different can go together, that there can be functional subordination and other exaltation without the loss of dignity or worth. The world tells us that isn't so. How we build our marriages tells a lot about whom we have believed.

Secondly and lastly, the doctrine of the Trinity is specifically applied in the Bible to the way we do church.

2. Church

We'll move very quickly here and just quote one passage where Paul upholds forcefully the importance of unity and diversity inside the church:

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12. ESV)

Paul says: "The oneness and the diversity we meet in the person of Christ dictates a oneness and diversity in the way do church as the Body of Christ." That makes sense. He goes on to say that there are many different gifts, we don't all have the same gifts, but we are all part of the same body. The eye can't say, because I'm not an ear, I'm not part of the body and neither can the foot say because I'm not a hand I'm not part of the body. A good body has unity and diversity and so it is must be in the church. We don't have time to unpack this in full so let me just state two very obvious implications:

- i. Targeted church is an abomination
- ii. The notion of a singular "sign gift" is indefensible

First of all for church to be church we have to do everything we can to include a variety of diverse persons. Old and young, rich and poor, men and women, black and white. The modern day notion that you can grow a church faster if you target a specific demographic – like young professionals – is therefore an abomination; it is an assault on God’s essential character and a blatant defiance of Biblical teaching. This is the way we are being told to do it today at church growth conferences, we are being told that the fast growing churches all target young professionals. We are being told that if you plant a church you can leave all the crusty old people behind and start fresh. You can attract the young, rich, entrepreneurial set and these in turn will attract other young, rich, entrepreneurial people. Where is that in the Bible? How is that in any way the Body of Christ?

Listen friends we go to extreme and at times ridiculous lengths at this church to be multi-generational and we do it because we are convinced God knows best. I can tell you it is a lot harder to do it the way we’re doing it. It makes music agonizingly difficult – it makes putting on pants in the morning agonizingly difficult. It has become comic legend around here how often I receive comments on my pants. Because in order to be a multi-generational church I have to wear multiple types of pants. I have to wear dress pants at least twice a month for the older folks to feel respected and represented. I have to wear dress jeans in order to make the young people feel respected and represented. Which means no matter what pair of pants I put on in the morning I will receive feedback. I don’t care. I will keep doing it because we are going to be a multi-generational church and if that means I have to spend money on pants then so be it.

Just as disastrous as the 20th century idea of targeted church was, the 20th century idea of a universal sign gift. The idea that unless you speak in tongues you are not part of the true church has thankfully almost entirely receded into the history books. It is patently untrue, it is an idea that could only be advanced by pastors who cannot read Greek because Paul explicitly forbids this teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:29-30. Do all speak in tongues, he asks. In English that sounds like an open ended question but in Greek it is not because it includes in it a negating particle which mandates the answer NO. No we do not all speak in tongues. Where would the body be if all were a tongue? That would be as grotesque in the physical realm as it is in the spiritual.

To be a Trinitarian church is to delight in diversity while we insist on unity. Unity of confession, diversity of personality, colour, gender, education, intellect, capacity, wealth, age and giftedness.

This is the Body of Christ and the glory of God and the good of all mankind. And all God's people said, amen.