



## Getting Theological: Trinity

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

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June 16, 2019

The past couple weeks we closed out the Easter season with Christ's ascension and with the gifting of the Holy Spirit. We have talked about the rationale and significance of Christ's departure, and what it means for us to be empowered by the Spirit. As Christ, the incarnate God, departs, we are gifted with the eternal Spirit of God that we might be enabled to do the work of God in the world. The language we use to explain the Ascension and Pentecost are rife with rich theological claims regarding the triune nature of God.

As Christ was departing in preparation for the Spirit's arrival, Christ makes this claim to the disciples, saying, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." I indicated last week we'd talk more about this theological claim this week, because it too is saturated with an undertone of the triune nature of God. This is an appropriate week to pick up on this claim by Christ, and to flesh out our triune understanding of God, because this is Trinity Sunday.

Represented in the three rings on the banner to my right, Trinity Sunday celebrates the doctrine of the Trinity, the three Persons of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Admittedly, I find the Trinity to be one of the hardest theological concepts to teach. On top of that, it's possible that the only thing harder than teaching the doctrine of the Trinity is comprehending someone else's teaching on the Trinity. (I know, I'm setting this up to be an amazing sermon. Bear with me.) Not only is the doctrine of the Trinity rooted in ages of philosophical debates among some of the most intellectual of theological thinkers, and that makes it hard to interpret into modern vernacular and mental comprehension, but the argument for the Trinity is based on Biblical concepts, not necessarily Biblical texts.

In the whole of the Scripture, the word "Trinity" is *nowhere* to be found. The Kings and Prophets of the Old Testament don't teach the Trinity of God. While Jesus' language is full of explanations of how he is the Son of God, and the witness of the Father, and the vision of the Father on earth ... and while Jesus speaks of the Spirit to come as being an extension of his work, the Spirit of his truth ... Jesus never speaks of the Trinity. Jesus never calls himself the "second person" of God. Furthermore, in Paul's letters, for as rich as they are theologically, Paul never suggests that the Godhead is a three-in-one entity.

There is an abundance of trinitarian-*like* language in the Bible, and this language is picked up in the early Church through the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Ignatius of Antioch claimed at the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century that we are to be obedient to "Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit." There is a clear understanding among early believers that there are three persons who offer divine guidance for our faith. Yet, to define the three as wholly distinct, to assert there are three *separate* divine sources of guidance for

our faith, one has to wrestle with our assertion that we are a monotheistic faith. If we are worshipping three entities – if three separate but equal entities rule over us – we are by definition polytheistic, or tritheistic. Such a claim caused a lot of problems for the early church which had vehemently rejected the polytheistic faiths of others, including the Greeks and Romans which had a different deity for every aspect of life – one god for the sun, a god for the rain, a god for love, a god of the heavens, a god of the seas, so on and so forth.

To distinguish Christianity from such polytheistic faiths, while still lifting up the Father, Son, and Spirit as having three distinct natures, the early Church started to focus in on how these three relate. Trying to better define and clarify this three-in-one understanding, we finally start to see the word “Trinity” appear in the language of the Church late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, over 150 years after Christ’s death. Theophilus of Antioch, who served as a Bishop in the early church, claimed that the Trinity was comprised of God, the Word of God (the *Logos*), and the Wisdom of God (which he defined as the Holy Spirit). It would not take long for this doctrine to become a widespread topic of debate, with other voices chiming in to offer their own understanding of the Trinity. We see the earliest defense of the Trinity on a grander scale by Tertullian in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. The first official doctrine of the Trinity is not codified until 325 at the Council of Nicaea, from which we have the Nicene Creed, which gives wording to this Trinitarian claim, saying that Christ is, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;” and the Holy Spirit is, “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

Shy of offering a full defense of the Trinity and going back through the many councils of the early Church that argued over the “right and appropriate” understanding of the Trinity, I find a much more valuable question today to be, “What do we learn about our call as a people of faith given our profession in the Triune God?” What does it mean for us to profess belief in the Godhead to be three-in-one, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit?

In considering, what does the doctrine of the Trinity mean for us, I’m struck by the first mention of the Trinity in Christian writings by Theophilus of Antioch. Again, in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, Theophilus offered that the Trinity was comprised of God, the Word of God (the *Logos*, who we call Christ), and the Wisdom of God (which Theophilus says is the Holy Spirit). It is this reference to the “Wisdom of God” that I find most interesting, and is what leads me to our scripture in Proverbs 8.

Here in chapter 8, we are instructed regarding an entity known as Wisdom. I am curious, picking up on Theophilus’ claim of Wisdom as the third person of the Trinity, as the Spirit of God, is this what Proverbs asserts? Does this text affirm such a claim?

In the course of this chapter, Wisdom is not defined as a trait or an intellectual pursuit, but instead is spoken of and is speaking as an individual entity. The text offers that Wisdom is not some sub-set creation of God, nor is it a servant working for God. Instead, “Proverbs 8 has Wisdom rejoicing *with* God in creation as *God’s* work, not serving as a quasidivine pinch hitter.”<sup>i</sup> In the connection between Wisdom and creation, it seems Wisdom has a peculiar relationship with the first person of the Trinity, reaching all the way back to creation. But it’s clear that Wisdom is not wholly the First Person of God – it is separate, yet, equally participatory in the work of God. So if Wisdom is not fully the First person, if it is external to the Father in Creation, where is Wisdom’s association?

Verse 24 says, “When there were no depths, I was brought forth ... When [God] established the heavens, I was there ... I was beside [God], like a master worker.” ... In our understanding of the Trinity, the Spirit existed in the beginning, a claim supported by Genesis 1:2, which says that in the beginning “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” As we named last week, the Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, which means wind, or breath. So it’s possible that Proverbs 8 supports Theophilus’ claim that Wisdom *is* the Spirit because Wisdom was there in the beginning just as the Spirit was, outside of the First Person, but working in tandem. This claim is also supported by a plethora of other Biblical texts. Consider Ephesians, chapter 1, which offers, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of *wisdom* and revelation, so that you may know [God] better.”

However, the Bible does not only define wisdom as a trait of the Spirit. Consider 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, which offers, “[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us *wisdom* from God.” Here, Paul seems to be saying that Christ *is* the wisdom given by God. This suggestion is also supported by John 1, which says that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This text is talking about Christ, who we define as “the Word” using the Greek noun, *Logos*. If Christ was in the beginning as “the Word,” it’s possible Proverbs 8 is not speaking of the Spirit, but is speaking of Christ as having been there as a co-creator in the beginning, not in the First Person, but associated with the Second Person in the work of creation.

There’s a lot of philosophical debate to be had in this line of questioning, but to me, it seems Theophilus was partially correct, but perhaps not fully accurate. The Wisdom of God is present in the Spirit, but perhaps it is not *isolated* in the Spirit.

Indeed, when you consider the many different ways the Biblical texts talk about *wisdom*, I think an argument can be made that *wisdom* is not to be considered as a singular entity within the Trinity – it is not solely associated with God as Creator, or God as Christ the Son, or God as Spirit. It seems that Wisdom is a thread of existence that underlies and offers foundational cohesion across the three persons of God.

Last week, we read from John’s Gospel that Christ called the Spirit *another paraclete* – that is, a following advocate. The Spirit, not seen in isolation from Christ, but seen as the purveyor of Christ, was offered not to diminish the work of God, or to begin a new work, but was sent to ensure the work that Christ had done continued through the lives of those who believe. In this vein, in the idea that the Spirit is not some new entity with a new charge of work, but is instead the continuance of the work begun by God in the beginning, created anew in the world by Christ, there is a singular thread that holds the Triune God – that holds the three persons of God – in concert with one another. That thread is Wisdom.

Yet, this Wisdom is Godly Wisdom, which differs from earthly wisdom. As people of faith, we would do well to understand the difference.

Earthly wisdom is based on statistically proven ideas. For example, in the United Methodist Church, we keep track of a *lot* of statistical data. We are asked to report back to the Annual Conference every

week specific numbers that the “powers that be” believe define healthy churches. It allows the Superintendent and Bishop to keep an eye on each church from afar. For example, we have to report average worship attendance, every week. We have to report offering contributions, every week. Each year we have to report baptisms, professions of faith, youth participation, child participation, small group meetings, building value ... and a whole a lot more, the list goes on. This data theoretically defines the health of the local church. I’m intentionally offering this as a skeptical idea, because, while I believe data is vitally important ... these data points do have great value ... almost all of the data points stem from a desire for institutional survival and not for the purpose of Gospel proclamation.

This idea of institutional survival not isolated within the Church.

Earthly wisdom is the kind of poll reporting that said 2016’s general election was going to look very different that it did on election night. In many ways, this kind of earthly wisdom tells us what we want to hear, or what we already think, without actually defining for us the truth and reality of life. You may have heard it said, if statistics is good for anything, it’s proving your point. Numbers can be tweaked to prove anything. Earthly wisdom is based on maintaining power for those who have power, or for supporting narratives that while not necessarily truthful, serve a purpose – whether corporate or personal.

In contrast, Godly Wisdom, wisdom as defined by the Bible, is “a way of living, talking, and thinking that honors God and blesses people.”<sup>ii</sup>

While there is truth that can be learned from microscopes and telescopes, and from analyzing historical trends, Wisdom, as defined by the Bible, is about being privy to an eternal purpose that precedes and supersedes any earthly understanding.

In the full of the Scriptural witness, what you find is that Godly Wisdom defines a purpose of creating perfect love, of redeeming the brokenness on sin to restore that perfect love, and a dispersing of power among believers so that perfect love may continue to sustain creation. Godly Wisdom breaks the normativity of structured society to pursue this purpose at all costs.

Consider Christ for a minute – how many rules did Christ break to exemplify Godly Wisdom? He healed on the sabbath, he talked with outcasts, he touched lepers, he refuted Temple leaders, he embraced foreigners, and he gave priority to the marginalized (just to name a few). Most of what Christ did went against the earthly wisdom that had been created, set-up, and structured to maintain a status quo of earthly power. Christ’s death on a cross went against earthly wisdom, refuting any claims that waring power is necessary to win out. Christ took the way of a suffering servant, and said in Godly Wisdom, the “the low shall be lifted up.”

The Spirit, picking up where God in Christ left off, drove the disciples from a hidden room into the public’s eye. For people who were fearful for their lives because of their association with Christ, this was an ill-advised move. But when we are filled with the Wisdom of God, we sometimes do things that make others think we are crazy, if not drunk – that’s what the public thought about the disciples on Pentecost – that they were drunk and crazy! Godly Wisdom does not mimic earthly wisdom.

It's Godly Wisdom that leads churches and individuals to pay-off the college loans of an entire college class. It makes no sense by earthly wisdom, but if your goal is reconciliation and liberation – you know, those things Godly Wisdom proclaims, you do it anyway. Earthly wisdom says that moving to a foreign country to help educate and eradicate poverty is a waste of money and time. But if you believe that all people are created by God, and are worthy of new life, Godly Wisdom proclaims you give up the luxuries of your life to ensure others have life, and thus God continues to call missionaries to serve around the world for this very purpose. Earthly wisdom says you maintain power when you've been granted power. But if you believe the last will be first, and you believe that God is tearing town unjust systemic human structures, Godly Wisdom says you give up your seat at the table to ensure that others who have never had voice can be heard.

Trinity Sunday is not just about this confusing theological decree that we are not a polytheistic faith, it's a joyful proclamation that God, in the person of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, has maintained a central focus of creating life, of redeeming life, of reconciling life, and of inviting us – empowering us – calling us – urging us – dying for us – that we might have such Godly Wisdom to continue the work of God's love in the world. For the Glory of God, the almighty three-in-one, we ask that we may be filled with Godly Wisdom, that we might celebrate the work of the Triune God throughout time, and that we might continue in the same work that God has already begun. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel J Treier. *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Doug Bratt. [cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu). Retrieved June 12, 2019.