

## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

A Trinity Sunday sermon on Matthew 28:16-20 and Genesis 1:1-2:4a

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

One day when I was at school, minutes before my Christology class started, one of my classmates, another young woman, scribbled something down on the corner of a page in her notebook and showed it to me. This wasn't that unusual - English was not her first language so sometimes she would have to ask when she didn't quite catch what was said. But this time, she had written three words that formed a question that I was so unprepared for that when I read them, I broke into a cold sweat.

Three words: **“Is orthodoxy true?”**

My knee jerk reaction was “What makes you think I have a clue?!?”

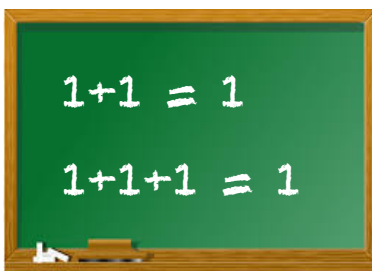
I didn't say that, and fortunately the professor walked into the room patted me on the shoulder and started talking to me, something about how another class he knew I was taking was going, I don't quite remember, but I do remember never being quite so happy to talk to him.

Eventually, after class, I think, I did talk with her about her question:

“Is orthodoxy true?”



I should specify, what she meant by “orthodoxy” in this case was really two doctrines in particular, or rather, two formulations.



(1) That Christ has two natures, human and divine, but is only one person, and

(2) that God is one essence, but three persons.

She was Catholic, and I'm Presbyterian of course, but both of our churches uphold these formulations. In fact, the overwhelming majority of churches claiming to be

Christian hold these formulations. The only two Christian-esque traditions you are likely to run into that don't believe in the Trinity are the Mormons and the Unitarian Universalists.

Anyhow, she wanted to know if God really was a trinity, one in essence, and undivided.

## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

I did my best to say what I hope it was she needed to hear. Namely that asking that question in no way made her a bad Christian, - at least it had better not since I certainly have my own questions. I think saying that you're not so sure about matters of doctrine means that you are really willing to let God be whoever God is instead trying to shove the Almighty into a preconceived framework, or mindlessly accepting whatever official dogma the Church says. Saying you don't know when it comes to God is a position that is very honest, especially if you've never yourself really experience God for yourself.

There was another aspect of her question that I told her was a good thing.

“Is orthodoxy true?” - that says to me that you consider Truth important.

This isn't questioning for the sake being rebellious or even for the sake of thinking for yourself independently of the authoritarian-, patriarchal-type institution the church has been throughout the ages.

This was about wanting the Truth. Wanting to know if those dogmas the church protects and propagates reflect God as God really is.



That was the question I didn't actually answer. All I could really tell her that I thought that it was True that life within the church is better than life outside the church. And that questions are no reason to excommunicate yourself.

I hope that was helpful, but it does not answer the question. After reflecting on this matter more though, If I am going to be an honest as my classmate was with me, Is orthodoxy true? - sort of.

In my mind it is actually a little scandalous to say that. It might actually be easier to write off the doctrines of the church as the religiously repressive ideas guarded by the powerful institution ruled largely by wealthy white men, and of course those gullible enough to be brainwashed by them. By the way if you're at all curious, looking at church history, that critique of the church is largely incorrect. But that is not my point, so I'm going to restrain myself.

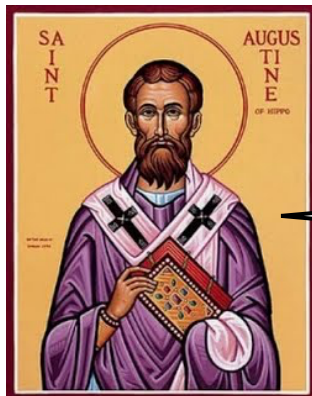
Theology is a tricky endeavor. A bishop in northern Africa around the fifth century, Saint Augustine, wrote in his book on the Trinity:

“I will be attempting to say things that cannot altogether be said...”

## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

Augustine is aware that he is not going to be able to do justice to his subject of the Holy Trinity, as he writes “thoughts are quite inadequate to their object, and incapable of grasping [God] as he is.” Between the limits of human reason and language it would seem like a lost cause.

As I mentioned earlier, the formulation Christians finally agreed on for describing the Trinity, is three persons of the same essence, undivided.



Augustine is very honest about what he thinks about the use of such words to describe God:

“we say three persons,  
not in order to say that precisely,  
but in order not to be reduced to silence”

Okay, why not be reduced to silence?

There is a longstanding tradition within Christianity,  
one I largely ascribe to, that

“there is nothing so like God as silence” - Meister Eckhart

This tradition prefers to allow God to be His radically unknowable self, incorporeal, invisible, and incomprehensible. It is a mystically inclined line of thinking, insisting that the way to knowing God at a meaningful level requires stillness and silence, and openness to God. This is not merely external quiet, but more importantly, and often harder to come by, inner quiet. Any thoughts one might have about God, and all images the mind might use to grasp God just get in the way.



## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

So, if silence is good, and ideas get in the way, why bother using words to describe God in the first place? Especially when those words can not fully capture who God is accurately?

Because God *matters* to who we are as Christians. We need a way of talking about Him if we ever expect to even know to quiet our minds and open ourselves to a mystical experience of God. And especially for the non-mystically inclined, there is more to our reality, our experience of being Christian than silence allows.



Christianity is the only major religion in the world that has this concept of God as being simultaneously three and one. The trinity is a hallmark of our Christian understanding of life the universe and everything. Our theology, our sense of how God interacts with creation and us is dependent on it.

God is one. This means that the one God is the God of the whole world and everyone in it. If there are not other gods, then my God is your God. If the God that made me and orders my life is the one true God who made and orders the universe, then he also made people we may not like. One God. One Humanity. Whether or not anyone else recognizes is irrelevant, because we see it. We recognize it. We experience it.

During Jesus's earthly ministry, he brought Jews together with Gentiles, men together with women, slaves together with the free. Together, at the table, even the ritual meal. At that point it was revolutionary that that could be done. This is what the early

Christians thought of as the new creation - Jews and Gentiles together at the Lord's Supper. This was no longer that Israel's God was so much more powerful than the idols of the pagans that didn't deserve the status of gods. These early Christians learned and experienced that God has to be one, because we are one, and share in one baptism and eat one bread.



So okay, what about the three part?

Let's talk about Jesus for a minute.



## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

Jesus's disciples had this conviction that their teacher was divine.

As the gospel writers tell us:

1. Jesus healed people of their diseases, made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, etc. In other words, he took what was in disorder, the chaos, within people's physical bodies and brought order to it, setting everything to its proper purpose.
2. When he stilled the storm and walked on water, he calmed the chaos. Water is highly symbolic of chaos and death, and he could order it with a word.
3. And when he resurrected from the dead, he proved to be master even over death, one of the most chaotic things we experience. He brought life where there was none.

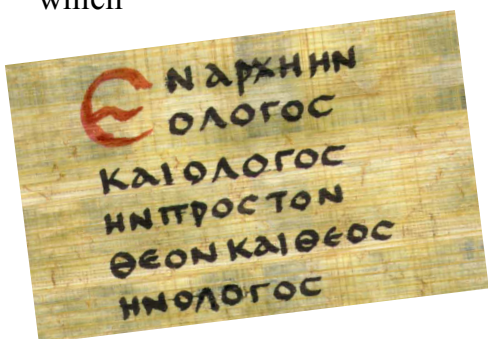
All of that is what God does. God creates. God brings order to chaos. God brings forth life where we would think it impossible. God does this. Jesus does this. Truly this is the Son of God.

The disciples and the early Christians felt it proper to pray to this Son of God, and considered him divine. In fact the earliest controversies were not about whether he was divine, but whether or not he was ever truly human.



Looking back through the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, the early Christians found Christ throughout. They equated him with the wisdom and the Word of God by which

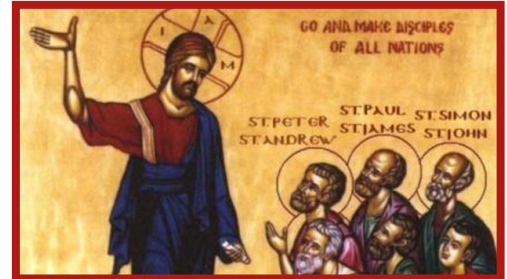
God spoke the universe into being.



This is why John can begin his Gospel “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” and then say that Christ is this same Word of God. So now we have established that in God there is something we call the Father, and something we call the Son, together before the beginning.

## IS ORTHODOXY TRUE?

At the same time there is the Spirit of God in the mix. The Spirit in the reading from Genesis this morning, hovered over the face of the waters. This Spirit of God is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament as well. And post-Pentecost, when the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they knew that what they were experiencing was also God. According to the gospel writers, Jesus told them that he was sending them the Holy Spirit, and this is how they understood what it was they were experiencing. And of course, in today's gospel reading, Jesus tells them to baptize in the **name** of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A singular name, for the three "persons" he names.



And so, from the beginning, we have Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we also know that the Lord our God is One. What the doctrine of the Trinity does is to preserve both truths. That God is Three. That God is One. Persons is the word we use to describe God's threeness. Essence is the word we use to describe God's unity.

We do not and cannot know God in his Essence. We don't know how the intra-Trinity relations work. We think of the Father as the unbegotten Source. We think of the Son as the only begotten. We think of the Spirit as proceeding from the Father. But such words are something of placeholders, because we can't get it quite right. The words might not quite fit perfectly, but they do the job of letting us say something about the Christian sense of who God is. Even if we cannot express the mystery of God as Trinity, we still maintain that that together all three are worshiped and glorified.



Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and the Holy Spirit  
Holy Trinity, One in Essence, and Undivided.  
Now and Forever, and to the Ages of Ages. Amen.