

Ps 66:1,2
 Hy 7:1(Athanasian Creed)
 Ps 145:1,2
 Hy 13:1-5
 Hy 4:1,2,3
 Isaiah 40:12-31
 Lord's Day 8

Yarrow, July 3, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The subject of LD 8 is the Trinity, that mystery of God being three in one, one in three. It's a LD with which we have problems, problems because we struggle to understand the riddle of the Trinity but find ourselves unable, problems too because we just don't see the value of this doctrine in the grind of this life. Something in us, then, tells us that we'd just as soon skip LD 8.

Allow me, then, brothers and sisters, to draw your attention to the creed we used earlier in this service to profess our catholic and undoubted Christian faith, the Athanasian Creed as printed on pg 497 of your *Book of Praise*. Notice Art 1 and 2 (as it appears in the old edition): "Whoever desires to be saved must above all things hold to the catholic faith. Unless a man keeps it in its entirety inviolate, he will assuredly perish eternally."

That's strong language! This creed insists that the only way to be saved is to hold "the catholic faith". And what is that "catholic faith"? Art 3: "Now this is the catholic faith, that we worship one God in trinity and trinity in unity." It's repeated in Art 28: "So he who desires to be saved should thus think of the trinity."

Shall we skip LD 8? According to your own creed, beloved, we cannot; we wish salvation, and we cannot be saved, says the Athanasian Creed, unless we believe rightly that difficult doctrine of the Trinity. That being so, we listen with humble reverence this afternoon to what the Lord has revealed about Himself as triune God.

I use this theme:

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY POINTS UP THAT MY GOD IS INFINITE IN HIS GREATNESS.

1. The wealth of the doctrine of the Trinity
2. The consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity

1. The Wealth of the Doctrine of the Trinity

With earlier Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism we confessed that every person, ourselves included, is by nature lost in sins and misery. God, however, provided in mercy a Mediator for lost sinners, one who could reconcile sinners to God. The first Q & A of LD 7 had reminded us that the only way a person lost in sins and misery can benefit from the Mediator God put forward is this: he must have faith. Faith, we confessed in Lord's Day 7, involves not just that one accepts for truth that Jesus died for my sins, but rather that one holds God's hand in all the ups and downs of life, accepts what He says, does what He instructs.

This faith, this dependence on God, involves, of course, knowing who God is and what He has promised. So Question 22 asked: "What, then, must a Christian believe?" And the answer of the Catechism is this: to benefit from the Mediator God gave, the Christian must believe "all that is promised us in the gospel." But, says this Answer further, all that is promised us in the gospel has in turn been summarized in the articles of the Apostles' Creed, those 12 articles we confess together most Sunday afternoons. Says the Catechism: that Apostles' Creed provides a workable

summary of all God has revealed, herein you find all you need to believe in order to benefit from the Saviour and so escape your sins and misery.

Now we come to Lord's Day 8. And lo, what is it that Lord's Day 8 asks?? Question 24: "How are these articles divided?" Understand it well, beloved: the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed provide a summary of all God has promised in Holy Scripture. Now Lord's Day 8 wants to cook down this summary even further. How it proposes to do that?? Says Answer 24: these 12 articles break down into three parts: "The first about God the Father; the second about God the Son; the third about God the Holy Spirit." Notice: three times *God*.

What that means? This: the person who wishes to be saved, who wants to benefit from the Mediator God gave, must believe God. GOD HIMSELF is the object of what we are to believe; whoever wishes to be saved must believe GOD.

That doesn't sound so startling. But tell me, beloved: who is God?¹ Can you describe Him for me, give me a description so that I receive a neat mental picture of God and so am able to say: this is the God in whom I believe, listen, I'll explain Him to you?

Sure, we can turn to our Bibles and mention various things about God. In the Belgic Confession we acknowledge that the Lord our God is "eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good" (Art 1). But really, beloved, having confessed that, do you now understand well who God is? Can you now explain God to me, describe Him, tell me how He works? Given time and study you could undoubtedly tell me all about a car, how it's put together, how it works, what its parts are for and what makes it tick. And with equal time and study you could do it of a moose too. But can you do it for me of God? Can you understand God, discern how He works, give me a complete picture of Him?

We know the answer, beloved. It's something we cannot do. God is *God*, the One who sovereignly created us and everything around us out of nothing. We're but creatures, and our limited understanding is further darkened by sin too yet. Understand God? Pull Him apart, put Him together again, discern what makes Him tick? Never. He is God. And see there now, beloved, the lesson of the doctrine of the Trinity. The God in whom you are to believe in order to be saved far surpasses your understanding.

How it is, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity points up the fact that God is beyond our understanding? Why, the whole notion of the trinity itself defies understanding. For no person can understand how God can be three and at the same time one, one and at the same time three. And exactly because the trinity is beyond our understanding, it follows that this triune God is also beyond our understanding.

Listen with me to the Scriptures. The Bible makes very clear that God is one. Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is ONE." One He is, not two or three or more. ONE. So also Isaiah 44: "Besides Me there is no God," there is not a second (vs 6). Nor does God refer to Himself as a plurality; He does not say here: besides US there is no god. No, one God and only one God there is; besides ME there is no god. And the New Testament agrees with the Old: I Corinthians 8: "for us there is one God" (vs 6).

Yet at the same time the Scriptures are equally adamant that God is more than one. On the sixth day of creation, God counselled within Himself about making man, and then He did not say: "Let Me make man in My image;" no, He said: "let US make man" (Genesis 1:26) "From God's saying 'Let Us make man in Our image,' it appears that there are more divine persons than one" (Belg Conf, Art 9).

¹ cf J vanGenderen, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), pg 143: re Trinity: "dat is het fundamentele antwoord op de vraag, wie Hij is."

The very same Isaiah who insisted that God is one also writes about a plurality in God. Says Isaiah:

"In all their affliction He was afflicted,
And the angel of His Presence saved them;
In His love and in His pity He redeemed them....
But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit..." (63:9f).

Here distinction is made between God on the one hand, the "angel of His Presence" on the other (this turns out, we learn from other passages of Scripture, to be the Son), and the Holy Spirit in the third place.

What is rather obscure in the Old Testament, though, is stated clearly in the New. In terms too clear to be misunderstood Jesus says in John 10 that He and the Father "are one" (vs 30). Similarly, Peter in Acts 5 calls the Holy Spirit 'God' (vs 3f). At the baptism of Jesus, we are confronted with the Trinity. Say the Scriptures of that baptism: "...the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased'" (Lu 3:21f). Here are the three persons of the Trinity: the Father spoke from heaven while the Holy Spirit descended upon the Son on earth.

In His closing words before His ascension as recorded in Matthew 28, Jesus told His disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). These three Persons are placed on a level, each treated as true God. So too, the apostle Paul closes His second letter to the Corinthians by placing the three Persons of the Godhead on a level: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14).

It all comes down to this, beloved: the Scriptures are agreed that the God of the Bible is One yet Three, is Three yet One. As the church has confessed it in LD 8: "God has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God" (8.25).

Where that leaves us? That leaves us, brothers and sisters, with a riddle, a mystery. My finite mind cannot fathom how Three is One, how One is Three. But that's the singular testimony of Scripture, and so we have no choice but to accept it. The God of the Bible, the God in whom I must believe to escape my sins and misery, is 3 in 1, far beyond my comprehension. It makes no sense to my limited mind, but that's the way it is.

But if this God, triune as He is, is above my understanding, consider, congregation, how great this God must be! In the world around us there is so very much that the finite mind of man can understand. We can get men to the moon, we can blow atoms apart, we can describe how whole ecosystems work, and we can do it because we know so much of how things work. But understand God we can't; that He's three and at the same time one is well and truly beyond the human mind. Truly, He must be great.

And that conclusion is no surprise! The infinite greatness of God is precisely the teaching of the Bible. Isaiah 40: "To whom then will you liken God?" (vs 18). The question arises in the context of what Isaiah had recorded about God. Says the prophet: God is far, far beyond what people can imagine. Vs 12: "who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?" Imagine: all the water in the Fraser River (to say nothing of the Pacific Ocean): measured in the hollow of a hand?? See there how great God is! And vs 12 again: who has "weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" Vedder Mtn, Elk Mtn, Mt Cheam, the whole of the Cascade Range, weighed in a scale?? Again, that's far, so far beyond what any man can do. But, says the prophet, it's not beyond God. See there the greatness of this God!

And vs 15: who cares about the drop that's left in the pail after you've watered your horse? Says the prophet: so great is God that the nations of the world are of no more significance than a drop in a bucket. The world's mighty men, with all the armies and weapons they have at

their disposal, are to God of no more significance than a drop in a bucket –why not?– because this God is so great.

On goes the chapter, hammering repeatedly on that central truth of God's infinite greatness. That notion of God's greatness embodied in the doctrine of the Trinity is pressed upon us by the prophet Isaiah: "to whom then will you liken God?" He's so different, He's so far above, so infinitely beyond our understanding. Triune, infinitely great: see there who God is!

2. *The Consequences of the Doctrine of the Trinity*

This reality of the infinite greatness of God implies a couple of consequences: second point. The first consequence I need to draw out is this: if God is so great as to be three in one, I shall not try to understand God, shall not try to discern how He is "put together".

Not try to understand God. That runs contrary to my inclinations. As a human being, I want to understand, would love to be able to set the Lord God on my worktable, so to speak, and come to grips with how He works.

In the course of the history of the church, some people have tried. There was once a man² who investigated the matter of the Trinity and concluded that Triune God was in fact One Person who revealed Himself in different ways at different times. God, said this man, was somewhat like a person who is father at home, foreman at work and elder at church. He's always the same man, but he wears a different hat depending on where he is. So is God, said this man; in the Old Testament God revealed Himself primarily as Father, in the time of the disciples particularly as Son, and after Pentecost especially as Holy Spirit. One God wearing three different hats, depending on the circumstances. And we for our part say: we like that explanation because now we can understand God better, now we have a neat mental picture of what God is like.

There was another man³ who disagreed with the first, and came up with a different perception of how God is three in one. He argued that the Father alone was truly God as we normally think of Him, the Creator and Preserver of the universe. This one God saw on earth a very good man (Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary), and so adopted this man to be His Son. So impressed was He with Jesus' work that God even called Him "Son of God" and brought Him into heaven to sit at His right hand. But, when all is said and done, Jesus isn't true God as the Father is; He's instead adopted. As to the Holy Spirit, well, this man considered the Holy Spirit to be the power, the muscle which comes out from God; it is the Spirit who executes the directives of God. Again, to our minds it's all very neat and attractive; it makes sense of the mystery of God's trinity.

But consider now, brothers and sisters, what one does to God's greatness when you set Him on your table and try to understand how He works. To set Him on your table and try to understand how He works means that you have in effect brought God down to your level, made Him an object of your investigation. And that, beloved, is something I may not do! For God is God, infinite, Creator of heaven and earth, and I am but a creature, formed by His hand. Shall the creature investigate how His Creator is "put together"? Does the pot dissect the potter? Let us rather be humble and know our place as creatures fashioned by infinite God. It is not for us to try to understand how God works, not for us to try to understand how God is put together; it is for us instead to stand in awe of this God, to acknowledge readily and quickly that God is God, infinitely great and therefore worthy of all honour and praise and adoration.

In that regard it's important to note that over the years the church has condemned the thinking of the two men who thought to understand God. Art 9 of your Belgic Confession terms these two men "false Christians and heretics." That's strong language, yes, but necessary

² His name was Sabellius; cf J vanGenderen, pg 147.

³ His name was Paul of Samosata; his thoughts were further developed by Arius. See J vanGenderen, pg 147.

language too because it will never do to try to bring infinite God down to a level that finite people can understand. The Jehovah's Witnesses of today follow in the line of one of these two teachers, they try desperately to understand God, and so invariably end up thinking too small of the Creator and too highly of the creature man, and –says the Confession– that makes one a false Christian and a heretic. For our part we do well to take care that our thoughts of God do not become too small, that we do not think of God in human terms. We do well instead always to stand of awe of the greatness of this God.

A second consequence follows from this first. If God is so great that I am not even to try to understand how God is put together, it follows that I am not to try to understand either what God does, or why He does it.

This God is so infinitely great that He is one and at the same time three, is three and at the same time one. Yet what has this God done? Of all things, He has been pleased to make me His child, become My Father! Understand that? Certainly not! Listen to Isaiah again: so great is God that the inhabitants of earth are as so many grasshoppers to Him (40:22), and who when he walks through a dry field actually makes a point of avoiding stepping on a grasshopper?! Such is His greatness that we are as insignificant to Him as a grasshopper – and yet this infinite God has made His covenant with us! Understand why this infinite God should do that?! Understand why the Father in Triune God should pledge to me when He had me baptized that I (of all creatures!) should be His child and heir, that He would provide me "with all good and avert all evil or turn it to my benefit"?! Understand why the Son in the holy Trinity should pledge to me that He would Himself wash away all of my horrid sins and make me righteous before God?! Understand why the Holy Spirit in the Trinity would promise to dwell in me, renew me?! Truly, beloved, there is so much here that baffles our understanding, we've got so many questions about why such a God would bother with such sinful beings.

But here's now the thing, my brothers and sisters: given the greatness of this Triune God – three in one– it isn't for us to ask questions, it isn't for us to try to understand God. It's for us instead to adore, to stand in awe of God, to stand in awe of Him not only on account of His greatness (though that in itself is certainly enough to praise Him without end), but to stand in awe of Him also because of what He –infinitely great as He is– what He has done to me in making me His child. Truly, His ways are higher than our ways....

Now a third consequence follows in turn, congregation. That third is this: if this is my God, certainly it's for me simply to trust Him. Whatever the Father does, whatever the Son does, whatever the Holy Spirit does in my life: it's all OK. If such a God has made me His child, I'm surely safe with Him, always. If He says that there is one way to escape the sins and misery in which I find myself, and that is by accepting in faith the Mediator He graciously gave, then that's the way it is; I humbly embrace that Mediator. If He considers that His name shall be praised through giving me afflictions as Job received, then I shall accept in quietness what the Lord gives. And if He in wisdom determines that my struggles against the sins within me should remain difficult, then here too I shall accept His ways, and resolutely battle on. For if this infinite God is my God, then Yes, I'm perfectly safe with Him, come what may. How did Isaiah say it again at the end of chapter 40?

"Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the Lord,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
There is no searching of His understanding" (vs 28).

That is my God, triune, infinite. And so I am safe.

Shall we skip LD 8, consider it too difficult and irrelevant? Far, far from it, beloved! For now I've seen something of the God under whose care I live every day, and so I'm comforted, for this life and the life to come. And now I understand too those words of the Athanasian Creed: "He who desires to be saved should think thus of the Trinity."