

HC LD 8

GOD: ONE GOD IN THREE PERSONS

Text: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 8 **Read:** John 1:1-18

1: God's being

One God (Dt 6:4; 1 Co 8:4, 6)

Three persons; Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Compare OT:

The Spirit of God hovers over creation (Ge 1:2)

The Angel of the Lord (Ge 16:6ff; Ex 3:2f; Ex 13:21/14:19)

Compare NT:

In close relationship (Mt 3:16-17; Mt 1:20/Jn 3:16; Acts 2:32,33)

Baptise in the name of the Triune God (Mt 28:18-19)

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God (Lk 4:18 (Isa. 61:1)) and Jesus (Gal. 4:6)

Jesus is God (Jn 1:18; He 1:3)

The Holy Spirit is God, having divine qualities (eg Jn 6:63; Ps 139:7)

2: God's work

God the Father and our creation (1 Co 8:6; Ge 1)

God the Son and our deliverance (Jn 3:16)

God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification (Ro 8; Gal 5:16ff; Eph 4:17ff)

All persons are also involved in all areas

In creation: Jesus (He 1:2), Holy Spirit (Ge 1:2)

In salvation: Father (Jn 3:16), Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5)

In sanctification; Father (Eph 4:24), Jesus (1 Co 1:2)

And so: Believe in God the three in one!

Dear Congregation

We're not looking at the Belgic Confession tonight, but the Belgic Confession begins, 'We ... believe ... that there is a single, simple, spiritual being, whom we call God – eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, ...'.

And as we begin to think about the Apostles Creed tonight, it is this eternal, incomprehensible, invisible God that we are trying to understand something about.

A Kindergarten teacher was once watching her classroom of children one day while they were drawing. As she came up to one little girl she asked what she was working at? The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

But it isn't quite that easy, is it? But how do you come to understand something about a being that isn't bound by time and space and logic the way we are, a being that is so radically different to us that we simply can't understand him – he is beyond our understanding, a being that we can't even sense with the 5 senses that we've been given – he is invisible to us? How do you study a being like that? How do you come to

know anything about him?

God isn't someone you can study in some kind of inductive, scientific, kind of way and come to understand. If we're going to know anything about God, he has to reveal himself to us. And thankfully he has revealed something of himself in his word, the Bible, so that we can at least know something about him.

And the Apostles Creed summarises some of that for us. It says something about the being of God – He exists as one God in three persons. And it says something about the work of God – the Father is especially involved in creation, the Son in salvation, and the Holy Spirit in sanctification.

Point 1

And so, thinking about the being of God first, God reveals to us that he is *one God that exists in 3 persons*. That's what the word Trinity is all about – a tri-unity, 3 in 1. And that doesn't make sense to us in any logical mathematical way, does it? In our minds $1+1+1=3$ not 1. And yet that is how God describes himself, and all we can do is accept it in faith.

The fact that *God is one God* is probably the part that comes easier for us. The moment you start reading the Bible, that's the understanding you get. And even though the other civilisations and nations around at the time believed in whole hosts of gods, God consistently says that their understanding of things is wrong. He is the only one true God. You can think of the Egyptians with their gods that they pictured as human bodies with the heads of animals and birds. Or you can think of the Canaanite gods that were also imagined after created things. The Greeks and the Romans also had their gods that they understood basically as superhumans. But even though that kind of thing has been the common idea down through the centuries, God tells us that the reality is that he is one, not many, and he isn't fashioned after any created thing.

He says that explicitly in Old Testament passages like Deuteronomy 6:4, 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.' And that's supported in New Testament passages like 1 Co 8:4, 'We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.'

There is only one God, the God of the Bible.

On the other hand, this one *God exists in 3 persons*.

And isn't that where we start to come unstuck, and realise that God is essentially incomprehensible to us.

We may be able to understand some things about him, we may even be able to have a living, loving, relationship with him, but we will never come close to fully understanding him.

But again, as you read the Bible from beginning to end, you get the increasing sense that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, until eventually you get to a point where you can't deny it any more, without misrepresenting what the Bible says.

The best illustration I can think of for the Trinity, but which still falls short, is probably a lump of ice, melting and evaporating in a saucepan on the stove. You have ice, water, and steam all together. All the same essence, but existing in 3 different forms.

And even though an understanding of the Trinity doesn't come out as clearly in the *Old Testament*, the hints are already there.

In Genesis 1:2 already, after God has created the earth as a formless, empty, dark watery place, who is hovering over the waters – the Spirit of God. A hint already, without much detail, that there is *a difference between the Father and the Spirit*.

Another very interesting OT hint is *the Angel of the LORD*. The first reference we have is when this angel of the Lord comes to Hagar after she has fled from Abram's tents. The angel is obviously distinct from the LORD, he's the angel of the LORD. On the other hand he speaks as if he is the LORD and Hagar recognises him as God, 'You are the God who sees me'.

And throughout the Old Testament, this angel pops up time and time again. He's the angel that stops Abraham sacrificing Isaac and provides a ram as his substitute. He says to Jacob, 'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.' He is the angel Moses meets at the burning bush. He is the angel in the pillar of cloud and fire.

This angel is apparently one with God in some ways, but distinct from God in others. And the traditional Christian understanding is that this angel is the 2nd person of the trinity before he came to earth as the man Jesus.

Then we come to the *New Testament* and things become so much clearer.

The three persons of the Trinity are often *mentioned in close relationship to each other*. In Jesus' conception and birth the Father sends his Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descends on the Son in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father speaks from heaven, 'This is my Son,' At Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and at Pentecost, you see this same interaction. As Peter says in Acts 2, 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.'

As well as that, in the Great Commission we are commanded to *baptise in the name* of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And New Testament *greetings and blessings* usually include both the Father and the Son, and sometimes also the Holy Spirit.

Then we find in Luke 4 that the *Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God*, and in Galatians 4 that he is the *Spirit of Jesus*. Jesus even says in John 14 that through the Holy Spirit the Father and the Son live in us.

And then in John 1:18 where Jesus is referred to as 'the One and Only', John writes that 'God the One and Only has made God known'. You can't get a much more explicit statement than that that *Jesus is God*.

As well as that we read regularly that the Holy Spirit has divine attributes and can do things that only God can do. *The Holy Spirit is clearly also God*.

And so, even though there is no one verse that tells us that God exists in 3 persons, and even though it isn't something we can understand logically, or model mathematically, when you stack all of the biblical evidence

up and are willing to accept it, you can't deny that God is Triune - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But because we can't understand this logically, *heresies* have abounded down through the ages that have denied this understanding of things. Some people would have us believe that Jesus was actually created. The Nicene Creed was written fighting that belief, but groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses would still have us believe that today.

Or some people would have us believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are only different manifestations of the same God – sometimes God acts as the Father, sometimes he acts as the Son, sometimes the Holy Spirit. I've talked to at least one person who believed that.

But the thing to do is simply struggle to understand the Biblical evidence, and even though we can't understand this logically, accept that in some way, God exists as the triune God.

Point 2

And then the other thing that the Apostle's Creed deals with is *the work that each person of the Triune God* is most involved in.

And so, first of all, *the Father is most involved in creation*. 'We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.' 1 Co 8:6 says, 'there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came'. And so, as we read Genesis 1, we can understand that when it says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, it is primarily the Father doing the creating.

And then *the Son is most involved in salvation*. And we could probably think of a thousand verses that tell us that. John 3:16 is one of the favourites. The message of the NT is clearly that Jesus came as one of us, died on a cross, and rose from the dead, defeating sin and death and Satan, so that whoever trusts in him will be saved from their sin.

And then *the Holy Spirit is most involved in bringing things to completion*, which for us means

sanctification. Sanctification involves our growing to be more like Christ. The Bible especially mentions attributes like righteousness, holiness, and knowledge. And so you can turn to Romans 8, which is headed in the NIV, 'Life through the Spirit', or Galatians 5 from verse 16, 'Life by the Spirit', or from Ephesians 4:17, 'Living as Children of Light'. Passages like these talk about the work of sanctification that the Holy Spirit is doing in everyone who believes in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

On the other hand, *all 3 persons of the trinity are involved in the other areas as well.*

In Hebrews 1:2 you discover that God did his *creating* of the universe through the Son. John in chapter 1 of his gospel equates Jesus as the Word with God's creative word in Genesis 1.

And as we saw before, in Genesis 1:2 you find that as God was creating and shaping the earth, it was the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters bringing everything to its destined end.

As well as that the Father is involved in our *salvation*. John 3:16 says that it was he who sent his Son into the world.

And as Jesus says to Nicodemus in the same chapter, we can't enter the kingdom of God unless we've been born again by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does everything that is needed so that we can turn to Jesus in faith.

And the Father and Son are also involved in our *sanctification*. Ephesians 4 says that our new self has been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. And in 1st Corinthians, Paul writes to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.

Conc

And so you see, as the catechism summarises, God is the one true God existing in 3 persons. We don't completely understand it, but that is only because in essence God is beyond things like space and time and logic.

As I said before, the best illustration I can think of is a lump of ice, melting and evaporating in a saucepan on

the stove. You have ice, water, and steam all together. All sharing the same essence, a unity, but existing in 3 different forms.

And we also see that God's work involves creation, salvation, and bringing things to completion, which includes our sanctification. As Paul writes in Romans 11:36, 'For from him and through him and to him are all things.' It's the message of the Bible in a nutshell, Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.