

Trinity Sunday

A sermon based on John 3:1-17 (18-20)

What should you do when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door? It's a waste of time. Just say politely: "No, thank you." You shouldn't try to talk with them because they'll skin you alive. And that has to do with a basic ignorance among us about what the Bible says.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have a book of instruction for their leaders, not the one that they give you at your door. It talks about the Bible. First, it says: Jesus was the son of God, but in the New Testament "son of God" means simply "sir."

In John 10:30 it says: "The Father and I are one." But then begins controversy between Jesus and the Jews. In 10:34, where Jesus is accused of blasphemy, he says: "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'?" Here Jesus is quoting from Psalm 82:6. To say that he is a son of God simply means he is a leader or a "sir." When the phrase, "son of man" is used, about 1/3 of the time in the New Testament it does mean "God," because it is referring to Daniel 7:13 where it talks about the son of man coming from Heaven. Not all the time, but only when it is referring to Dan 7:13.

If you get into a discussion with Jehovah's Witnesses, they will say: Haven't you read your Bible?! Don't you know John 14:28: "The Father is greater than I"? And then in Paul 1 Cor 15:28: "When all things are subjected to him (Christ), then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone." That means that Christ is **not equal to** the Father, he is **subject to** God the Father. Then others will say: But Matt 28:19 says baptize them "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Jehovah's Witnesses will correctly come right back and say: That is tri-theism. It doesn't talk about one God.

What do we do then? We could go on with many more examples of this problem but this is enough to show that the Trinity is not derived simplistically and directly from reading the Bible.

What is it we do when we confess a creed every Sunday, whether it be the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed? People say: We don't need creeds; we just use the Bible!

We ask: What are people doing in worship? Shakespeare has Hamlet say to Polonius: "Words, words, words." Are we just saying words? When the pastor says: "The Lord be with you." And you answer: "And also with you." Are these are all just words, religious words, just talk?

We may have the idea that when we use whatever creed, we think: We say something nice about God, and then he'll be nice to us. Or, we'll say something nice about God, and then he owes us one. Ha!

What is also an error is to think that a creed is there to remind us of what the Christian faith is about. That's also not true.

And we can see terribly stupid things happening, such as the seniors in Lutheran seminaries given the assignment to write their own theologies! This is absurd. They don't know enough. And they don't know what the real issues are. But the idea is that you know enough now to make up your own faith, and the next seminarian makes up his, and that's what it's about.

An evangelical Anglican in England has written a new version of the Nicene Creed, and some Lutheran churches are using it. It's 90% wrong. It has serious defects.

In 1967 the Presbyterian Church USA produced a confession called *The Confession of 1967*. They thought: Well, let's look at things today and say what we believe. That's not how ecumenical creeds and Presbyterian (Reformed) and Lutheran confessions came to be. Creeds and confessions came to be because we were in a fight to the death about salvation.

This is most easily seen in the baptismal service which states: Do you renounce the devil and all his ways? That is because basically confession is exorcism of the evil one. It is also spoken to the world in terms of persecution. For these reasons creeds are used in baptism and confirmation. And we then use creeds conspicuously in our worship services because we are saying: This is who we are, and this is who we are not. There is a reason for doing that.

In 1965 when Lutherans and Catholics began official dialogue, the first theme they took up was the Nicene Creed. It didn't take very long for the two sides to say: We agree. But the important thing was they did not agree for the same reason: Catholics said: We hold the Nicene Creed because it is an irreversible development. And the Lutherans said: We hold the Nicene Creed because it is the gospel. Notice it's not because it's in the Bible. But because it's the gospel.

Let's think about how this happened. You and I think: Now the important thing is this is what I believe. This is what I confess. And that, of course, is the wrong question. The question is: What is salvation? And how does God work? And how does he not work?

This is what the issue was in 325 at the Council of Nicaea (and then again when this was taken up in the first Council at Constantinople in 381). The issue was: Is there one God or two? Arius, most famous heretic of all time, knew his Bible very well and could cite these passages. For two hundred years the church had been struggling with "Jesus is God," and how he is God in terms of God the Father, the Lord, Almighty.

There were different formulas. The one that Arius used was: "of a like substance." A similar substance. There was when he was not, because the Father is Almighty. Just the way it says in John 14:28 and 1 Cor 15:28. What do we do now?

The formula that was used and it is in the Nicene Creed, although the way we have it translated is not as clear as in the original Greek, is "of the same substance." Not "of a similar substance." It says in the Nicene Creed, "of one substance." In other words, he is God in the full sense. There is one God. Why is that important? Because of salvation. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21: "God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

What they settled in 325 and 381 is that he is true God, and there is one God. Then the question was: Is he truly human? In 431 at Ephesus the Council held that he had been born of a woman. They didn't say Mary is the mother of God; they said she is "God-bearer." What is the relationship between the two? At 451 at Chalcedon they used the formula, "unmixed and undivided."

This is pretty heavy stuff. But the whole point of it is you can't get it simplistically from the Bible. But this is how the universal church has come to conclude we read the Bible. After all, the devil quotes scripture (Matt 4:1-10, Luke 4:1-13). There are all kinds of Christians, some 42,000 sects of Christianity. Some say: "Well, I read the Bible this way." Another says: "I read the Bible that way." Therefore we have this statement by the church universal. This is how the Bible is to be read.

What is the significance of these developments for you and me? It has to do with salvation. He is truly God. And: ". . . all things were made through him." If Jesus is truly God, then he is Creator as well. Then in the second place, it says: Jesus died. Again, that means that God died, because God is one. Not just one person of the Trinity died, because there is only one God.

Remember, as soon as you think you've understood it, you've misunderstood it. This has to do with the fact that what God is doing is beyond us, and beyond all our thinking, as is obvious in the account of John 3:8 about Nicodemus. The Spirit blows where he wills.

Unfortunately a lot of people say: Well, it's the way I believe. Or: It doesn't matter. It is important to see where the lectionary committee cut the John 3 text up. They end with the 17th verse. But then verse 18 reads: "He who believes is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

It is serious business. What we're dealing with here is the most important business in life. You could think that everybody would want to be in church every Sunday because it's pay day! He conquered sin and death because he is truly God and truly human. It makes all the difference. That's what the gospel is. Amen