

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 27, 2019**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE ONE TRUE GOD**

Acts 17-16-31

I'm going to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to you today. Not really. I just said that to get your attention. Not that many people – theologians, authors, pastors, and others – haven't tried to explain the Trinity.

Tertullian, one of the early church fathers (155-230 AD), said the Trinity is like a plant, with the Father as the root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as the One who spreads the beauty and fragrance of the plant.

Someone else tried to explain the Trinity by comparing it to an egg, which has a shell, the yolk, and the white – three different parts, but it is all one egg.

Still others have compared the Trinity to the three states of H₂O. Water may be liquid, solid (in its frozen state), or steam. It is all water, though it can exist in three different forms.

Then, of course, there is St. Patrick's analogy of the shamrock, a single plant with each of its three leaves representing one Person of the Trinity. I'm not sure what you do with a four-leaf clover.

These are all nice tries, but they all miss the mark. None of them is an adequate or accurate explanation of the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity, which expresses our belief that there is one and only one true God, who exists eternally in three Persons, known to us as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

St. Augustine wrote a lengthy book on the Trinity (*On the Trinity*), which I have not read. Not long after finishing the book, Augustine was walking on a beach along the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of North Africa when he met a boy who had dug a hole in the sand and was filling it with bucket after bucket of water from the sea. Augustine asked the boy what he was doing. The boy said: "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into this hole."

"What an impossible thing to try to do!" Augustine chided him. "The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small."

Continuing his walk, it occurred to Augustine that in his efforts to write on the Trinity, he was a lot like the boy. The subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small. (Source: Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, 101.)

The mystery of the Trinity – that is really what it is, a mystery – is far too vast and our minds are far too small to fully comprehend it.

A 20th-century evangelical theologian named Vernon Grounds said: “Explain the Trinity? We can’t even begin. We can only accept it – a mystery disclosed in Scripture. It should be no surprise that the triune Being of God baffles our finite minds. We should be surprised, rather, if we *could* understand the nature of our Creator. He would be a two-bit deity, not the fathomless Source of all reality.” (Grounds, “Radical Commitment,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 4.)

“Two bits,” if you’re too young to be familiar with it, means 25 cents, or, metaphorically, something of little value or significance. Which means that a God we can totally understand, a God we can put in a box, a God whose ways are always predictable, isn’t worth much. But there is way more to God than the most brilliant human minds will ever be able to grasp.

So, no, I’m not going to explain the Trinity today. Nor next Sunday. Though I *will* talk more about it next Sunday.

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\Last Sunday, in part 1 of our exploration of the *Essentials of Our Faith*, we focused on our belief that the Bible is the Word of God; that it is fully inspired (“God-breathed”) by the Holy Spirit; that it is infallible, unerring, totally trustworthy, and the final authority on what we are to believe and how we are to live. It is, as Emile Cailliet said, “the book that understands (us).” It is the written Word of God that points us to the living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can save us from our sins and bring us into a right relationship of trusting faith, loving obedience, and peace with God.

Today we turn our attention to what is says in the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith* concerning what we believe about God. Listen again to what we have already affirmed together this morning:

We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be honor, glory, and praise forever!

Amen!

Let’s think about the doctrine of God together, using the ministry and message of Paul in Athens as told in Acts 17 as the backdrop for our reflections.

WE BELIEVE IN GOD

First of all, we affirm without hesitation or reservation that we believe in God. We believe in one God. We believe in the true and living God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of everything there is. We believe in the true and living God who has revealed Himself in the world He has made, in history (which is, properly understood, *His* story), in the pages of the Bible, and in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. Yes, we believe in a triune God. We believe in one God who exists eternally in three Persons:

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Not one God made up of three “parts.” Not three Gods. One God existing in three Persons, each of whom – Father, Son, and Spirit – is fully God.

We believe in the same God the apostle Paul believed in, the God he proclaimed to the people and philosophers of Athens as the “unknown God” (Acts 17:23).

Athens in the 1st-century must have been a fascinating place, especially if you were interested in the latest ideas in philosophy. It was the intellectual capital of the ancient world. It boasted a rich philosophical heritage going back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. If you could make it big as a philosopher, or mathematician, or some other kind of intellectual in Athens, you could make it anywhere. The prevailing culture of Athens presented unique challenges to Paul in his explanation of the gospel.

There are four things about Paul’s experience and witness in Athens I want you to notice.

1. WHAT PAUL SAW

Notice first *what Paul saw* when he arrived in Athens. What he saw, it says in verse 16, was a city “full of idols.” It was “submerged” in the worship of pagan gods and idols of all kinds. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson describes Athens as “a junkyard of idols.” Everywhere Paul went, everywhere he turned, on every hill, in every square, it seemed, he encountered idol after idol, statue after statue, shrine after shrine, temple after temple, each one dedicated to this god or that goddess. The whole pantheon – the entire roster of “deities” – was there. That the Athenians were religious is beyond question. As Paul acknowledged in verse 22, they were “very religious” “in every way.” And they were proud of their religiosity. They were proud of their toleration, their acceptance and promotion of the worship of any and every pagan god and goddess imaginable. Religious as they were, though, Athens was a city full of people going about their daily lives in spiritual darkness and confusion.

That is what Paul saw. He was not blind to the outward beauty and magnificence of the city with its architectural landmarks and cultural achievements, any more than he would fail to recognize the beauty and grandeur of Washington, D. C., if he were transported here from the 1st century.

The architectural beauty and imposing magnificence of Athens did not impress Paul, however. They would not impress him, because Athens failed to recognize and bring honor to the true and living God who made and sustains everything there is. Athens would not impress Paul, because the city and its people did not acknowledge the true and living God and His claim to be Lord of all.

Athens, of course, was not and is not the only place where idols abound. We are surrounded by them, too, and by neighbors, friends, family members, co-workers, entertainers, politicians, and other cultural influencers – people in all walks of life who, knowingly or not, engage in idol-worship. An idol does not have to be a statue (though it may be). It does not require a shrine or temple for its worship (though a football stadium or other sports arena can easily

qualify as a place of idol-worship). An idol, simply put, is anyone or anything that takes the place of the true and living God in your life. It is a “god-substitute” (John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 291).

There are plenty of “god-substitutes” in the world today. Things like power. Political power. We see the idolatry played out every day on both sides of the political aisle. Or football. Or physical beauty. Or money. Or sex. Or fame. Or food. Or being liked. Or pleasure. Or comfort. Or convenience, on whose altar we in the U. S. continue to sacrifice more than a million unborn children every year. Or the idol of autonomy, seen in the relentless advocacy for the right to define or change or express one’s sexual identity with whomever and in whatever way a person chooses, which is at the center of many attacks on the church and the Christian faith in our culture today.

This is not an exhaustive list. Any of these, as well as others, can become an idol in a person’s life. Which means we must be vigilant in examining our hearts. We must renounce the worship of any idols or false gods we may have set up in our hearts, and resolve (and keep on resolving) to worship, serve, trust, follow, and love the true and living God and Him only. With all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

It is not uncommon for people today to believe in some kind of god of their own making. Actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, best-known as “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” on television, says: “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it is my personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I’ve been to every kind ... Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.” Which is not much different, if at all, from what the people of Athens did with all the gods and goddesses of their pantheon to choose from.

WHAT PAUL FELT

The second thing to notice is *what Paul felt* as we surveyed the religious landscape in Athens. Verse 16 says he was “greatly distressed” by what he saw. Far from being impressed by the religiosity of the city, Paul was distressed by the spiritual poverty, confusion, and anarchy that reigned in Athens. He had a heavy heart as he reflected on the spiritual lost-ness of the city’s populace. Grief filled Paul’s heart because he knew the idolatry and pagan practices of Athens grieved the heart of God. Seeing the true spiritual condition of Athens moved Paul to deep distress in his spirit.

Which prompts me to ask you (and to ask myself):

What about us? What about you? Are you distressed by the spiritual lost-ness of people around you? Around us? Or is it something you (we) have just learned to ignore? Are you (we) grieved by what grieves the heart of God? And if so, what is God calling us to join with Him in doing to make Him known in the milieu of today’s culture? In our own community?

These are questions we can’t ignore if we want to serve God’s purposes in our generation.

3. WHAT PAUL DID

Third, notice *what Paul did* as he was led by the Holy Spirit. Verse 17 says that “he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks (Gentiles), as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.”

Paul did not sit back and wait for people to come to him. He went where they were. He did not wait for an invitation. He did not beat people over the head with the Bible or preach an “angry” gospel. But he took the initiative to tell the philosophers and commoners of Athens about Jesus and the resurrection. Along the way, Luke says in verse 18, he conversed with both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureans believed that pleasure was the chief end or purpose of life. They believed the gods were distant and uninvolved in everyday life. Their guiding principle was “Live for the moment.” Even if we call them something different, there are a lot of Epicureans today.

Stoics, on the other hand, believed that everything was determined by fate. Their theme song was “Que sera, sera, whatever will be will be.” They believed that whatever happened was to be accepted without emotion. They refused to let their feelings sway them. They saw it was their duty to accept and endure whatever pain or loss they might experience with a spirit of quiet resignation. Maybe you know some 21st-century Stoics.

What did Paul do? He met them where they were. He engaged them on their own turf. He didn’t belittle them. He tried to establish common ground with them. But he did not, and would not, compromise the essence of the Christian faith.

How do we know this? Notice fourth *what Paul said*.

4. WHAT PAUL SAID

What did Paul say? The content of his message, Luke tells us in verse 18, was “the good news about Jesus and His resurrection.”

Which is our message, too. It is the core of our faith. Some people love to get into theological arguments or philosophical debates about strange questions just for the fun of it. That is not what God calls us to do. Getting hung up on little sidebars that obscure or deflect attention from the essentials of the Christian faith is not our mission from God. Our job, like Paul’s, is to make connections with people where they are, and to help them understand and embrace the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, along with the life-changing, eternity-altering implications of that good news for all who truly believe. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is – and will always be – Jesus.

THE UNKNOWN GOD

When the opportunity arose to present the message of the gospel on Mars Hill, to a gathering of philosophers known as the Areopagus (17:22), Paul’s strategy was to start where they

were. He began by making a personal connection with them. Among the temples and shrines and statues and altars that filled Athens was one dedicated “To an Unknown God” (17:23). It was this “unknown God” – the God they did not know – that Paul wanted to introduce to them.

It is impossible to exhaust the truth about God and all his glory, or the greatness of His character, in one sermon, or even in a million. All the books ever written, put together, could not contain the totality of who God is. Why? Because, as the Westminster Confession affirms: “God is infinite in being and perfection” (WCF, 2.1). *Infinite*. What is finite – human beings – can never completely understand or explain or contain the fullness of God in His infinite-ness.

You will never be able to fully figure God out, because He is God, and we are not. In Romans 11, after spending three chapters on the mysterious but beautiful and grace-filled doctrine of election, Paul exclaims:

Oh, the depths of the riches
of the wisdom and understanding of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments,
and His paths are beyond tracing out!
(Romans 11:33)

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: “Have you ever come on anything like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It’s way over our heads. We’ll never figure it out” (*MSG*).

It is true. We will never figure it all out perfectly. We will never figure God out totally. But it doesn’t mean that God is unknowable. It doesn’t mean you can’t know God personally. You can. I hope you do. If you don’t, I hope with all my heart that you meet Him and come to know Him in a personal way today.

Paul understood that we do not and cannot know everything about God. It didn’t stop him, though, from telling the people of Athens what we can and do know about God. Paul made five key points in his message as he introduced the previously “unknown God” to his audience on Mars Hill. I will mention them very quickly.

FIVE AFFIRMATIONS ABOUT GOD

1. God is the Creator of everything there is (verse 24). It is He who made the world and everything in it. The entire created universe owes its existence to God, who created it all. This is the starting point for a biblical world view.
2. God is the Giver and Sustainer of life (verse 25). It is God, Paul says, who “gives all men life and breath and everything else.” God is not dependent on us for anything. We are dependent on Him for everything. God does not need us. Nor does He need anything from us. But there is never a time, never a place or circumstance in life, when we don’t need Him.

3. God is sovereign over all nations and peoples (verse 26). He made them all. He made *us* all. And He rules over all. Though we do not yet see it, the promise of Revelation 11:15 *will* one day come to pass: The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever. Amen? Amen.

4. God is the Father of us all, and we are all His offspring (verses 28-29). Which means that every human being is created in the image of God and we owe our existence to Him. We are “God’s offspring” by virtue of the fact that we are created by God. But God desires something more. And He has done something more by sending Jesus His Son to live among us, to reveal the heart of the Father, and to die for us – the righteous for the unrighteous – so that we may become God’s very own *children*. His beloved daughters and sons, through faith in Him and His saving work for us.

5. God is the Judge of the whole world (verses 30-31). He will judge the world with justice, because He is just. His judgment is the perfect expression of His holy character. We don’t know *when* the Day of Judgment will come, but we do know the *identity* of the Judge. It is Jesus Christ our Lord, the eternal Son of God who became a man and died for our sins.

The good news – this is *really good news* – is that the Judge is also the Savior. The Savior is the Judge. All who truly trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord have nothing to fear on the Day of Judgment. The Judge, our Savior, has taken our guilt and punishment on Himself. In His amazing grace (the word “amazing” is not adequate to describe this grace), we have been declared “not guilty” – *forever* – in the courtroom of our God and King.

Think about that. Let it sink in.

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I have not explained the Trinity today. But, then, Paul didn’t explain the Trinity either, though his letters make it clear that he believed in the triune God. Next Sunday I want to talk more about the God we believe in.

For now, I want to leave you with this: What you believe about God – what *we* believe about God – is of paramount importance. Doctrine matters, because it has implications for real life. But *knowing about God* is no substitute for *knowing God personally*. Do not be content with knowing about God. Do not be satisfied with knowledge in your head, with an intellectual understanding of who God is. Get to know God personally. God wants you to know Him. In His Word, in the world He created, in the gift of His Son Jesus Christ, in His amazing grace, and in the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, God has given us everything we need in order to know Him. And love Him. And follow Him.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.