

The Doctrine Of The Holy Trinity.

Text: John 3:1-15
Suggested Hymns:

140, 296, 138, 536 ALHB, 139

- 1) The Holy Trinity Is As Great A Mystery
As Is Regeneration
- 2) Faith In The Triune God Is Indispensable
For Salvation

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 3:1-15, ¹ *There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”*

³ *Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*

⁵ *Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

⁹ *Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹ Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*

¹³ *No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

At the first glance this Gospel, which the Church has chosen for this day, does not seem to be suited at all to the occasion. This is the festival of the Holy Trinity, and not with one syllable does this Gospel seem to refer to the fact that there is but one God, and that there are three persons in the deity.

Our Gospel tells us of a Jewish ruler, by the name of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, and with whom Jesus had a lengthy conversation.

The subject of this conversation, however, was not the Holy Trinity, but regeneration, or the doctrine that a man must be born again of water and of the Spirit that he might enter into the kingdom of God. Still, in the course of our remarks we shall see that, although our text does not dwell upon the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as such, it distinctly teaches a Triune God and is therefore a most suitable text for the occasion.

There is a great difference between this festival and the rest of our Christian festivals. All the rest of our Christian festivals we celebrate in commemoration of a divine deed or fact.

At Christmas we commemorate the fact of Christ's birth, Easter, the fact of His resurrection, Pentecost, the fact of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. But there is no divine deed to be discussed today.

It is a divine doctrine, and the only doctrine which has been made the theme and subject of a Christian festival, and for the consideration of which a special day has been set apart.

Why was this done? Why did the Church since olden times devote a special day to the consideration of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and make that day a festival, that is, a day of rejoicing? Because by the profession of this doctrine the Christian Church was saved from disintegration or possible destruction.

In the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era a number of false teachers, highly educated men, almost succeeded in destroying the whole Christian Church by the introduction of rank heathenism.

The chief agitator was Arius, who denied Christ's divinity, and his chief opponent was Athanasius, who defended the old Christian faith. The controversy had been carried on for many years when, finally, in the year 325, a council was held in the city of Nice in Asia Minor, attended by more than three hundred representatives of the Church from all parts of the old world.

That council adopted a declaration of the true Christian faith by which the Christian Church was to be known in the world. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity itself was not discussed, but chiefly the doctrine of Christ's divinity. But especially the Athanasian Creed defines the Scriptural doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and was universally accepted as the standard of the true Christian faith.

Ever since then, those people who do not believe in the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are considered outside of the pale of the Christian Church .

Let us consider with the help of God's Holy Spirit, *The Doctrine Of The Holy Trinity*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Holy Trinity Is As Great A Mystery As Is Regeneration

When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to have a conversation with Him on divine matters, we are told, ³ *Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* ⁴ *Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*

⁵ *Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* ⁹ *Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"*

Here Christ most emphatically declares that in his natural state, as he is by nature, man cannot enter into the kingdom of God. By nature man is a damnable sinner, an abomination in the sight of God, flesh born of flesh, that is, a sinner by birth, and is so as long as he remains in this natural state.

This means that God, on account of His perfect holiness, cannot admit him into His blessed kingdom. Do you hear that, my friend? No matter how good you are in the sight of men, no matter how faultless is your life, no matter how strictly you keep yourself within the precincts of morality, all your own righteousness will not make you acceptable with God.

To be admitted into God's kingdom, to find favour with God, to make friends with God, whom you have so grievously offended by your sins, you must be born again.

You must undergo a complete radical change, a change that does not merely affect your outer life, so that you begin to do and act otherwise than before, but a change of heart, so that you begin to think otherwise and to feel altogether different than you think and feel in your natural state, a change so great that it amounts to a new birth, as if your old self had passed away and a new person had come forth in the place of your old self.

No human means can avail to bring about this spiritual birth. God alone can do it. Man is born again and made God's child by the water and the Spirit, that is, Baptism is the means of regeneration. Baptism is not regeneration itself, but man is regenerated or born again in Baptism by the power of God's Holy Spirit. *"Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare"* as *Luther's Small Catechism* teaches.

This new birth is a mystery which human reason cannot fathom. How surprised and amazed Nicodemus was to hear Jesus speak of being born again! All the explanation which Jesus gave did not seem to satisfy him; for his last words are, ***"How can these things be?"***

To understand regeneration, to know what it really is, you must experience the new birth yourself. You may know exactly what movements to make in the water to enable you to swim, but as long as you have not actually learned to swim and borne yourself above the water you will go down to the bottom, in spite of all your knowledge and instruction.

It is the same thing with regeneration. You must experience regeneration yourself or you will never know what it really is. Even the greatest sceptics cannot deny the wonderful change wrought in those who are truly converted from

the power of Satan to the living God; but how this change is effected, how the Spirit of God performs in sinful man the great work of regeneration, this is a mystery which no mortal man can solve.

Just as great a mystery as regeneration is the Holy Trinity. As the Athanasian Creed says, which has been embodied in the Symbolical Books of our Lutheran Church, *“The Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty, and yet there are not three who are almighty but there is one who is almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God the Holy Spirit is God, and yet they are not three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord, and yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.”*

Who can comprehend this? Human reason tells us that, if each of the three is a distinct Person and is God for Himself, there must be three Gods, and yet we must believe, according to the Scripture, that there is but one God. Scripture says *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.”*¹ And also *“There is none other God but one.”*²

Still, we must guard against misconceptions as to the word “person;” for the three persons are not persons in the commonly accepted sense of the word, not three different beings. By calling them persons we merely mean to distinguish between the three, and to say that the Father is another, *“the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is still another.”*

Yet from the fact that there is but one divine Being we must not infer that the three persons were but three different forms by which the one God had revealed Himself, and that the Father is the same as the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Son or the Holy Spirit the same as the other two.

This doctrine of the Holy Trinity is full of divine mysteries, and all we can do here is to bring our thoughts into captivity and to exclaim with St. Paul written in Romans 11:33, ³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!*

2. Faith In The Triune God Is Indispensable For Salvation.

Having shown to Nicodemus the necessity of regeneration that a man might enter into the kingdom of God, the Lord proceeds to show in what manner this new birth will bring a man into eternal life.

He says, *“¹¹ Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*

¹³ No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ”

Do you notice how the Lord emphasises faith in this second part of our Gospel? How He censures Nicodemus for not believing Him even in earthly things? How He demands for eternal salvation simple faith, such as the faith of those Israelites in the wilderness who were saved from death when, after being bitten by serpents, they simply looked up in faith and looked at the serpent of brass which Moses had lifted up for them?

And does not our Gospel distinctly mention the three persons in the Holy Trinity in whom we must believe? When Nicodemus says, *“**Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him,**”* is it not God the Father to whom Nicodemus refers, the first person in the Holy Trinity?

When Jesus calls Himself the Son of man who came down from heaven and is in heaven, does He not speak of the Son, or the second person in the Holy Trinity?

And when He says that a man must be born of the Spirit, does He not mention the Holy Spirit, or the third person in the Holy Trinity? Each of the three we find mentioned twice in our Gospel, God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

We must not be surprised at the early Christians for having considered the doctrine of the Holy Trinity so important as to make it the subject of a special festival to be celebrated in the Church.

The true reason why this was done is stated by the Athanasian Creed when it says, *“Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity. This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God without confusing the persons or dividing the divine substance.”*

So, according to the Athanasian Creed, no man can be saved without faith in the Triune God. And this is true and in strict conformity with the teaching of the Bible. Did not all the three Persons, every one of them, take a part and a share in the great work of our salvation?

How can you be saved without faith in God the Father who has begotten the Son from eternity, and who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life?

How can you be saved without faith in God the Son who was begotten of the Father in eternity, in the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in obedience to the Father, came into this world, became man, fulfilled for us the whole Law of God, which we did not and could not keep, because we are born sinners, and died on the cross for our sins?

How can you be saved without faith in God the Holy Spirit who from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son, who approaches us sinners in the divine Word and in the holy Sacraments, who raises us from spiritual death and brings salvation to our hearts, who kindles the flame of faith in our souls, and without whose divine work upon us we could never appropriate to ourselves the merits of our dear Saviour?

Faith in this Triune God is indispensable for eternal salvation, and those who deny either one of these three Persons are not Christians, even though they claim to believe in the Bible and class themselves with the Christians, as the Unitarians, the Universalists, the Spiritualists, the Christian Scientists, the Mormons, and others. They should be classed with the heathen because they deny the true God.

Let us not be deceived by those who attempt to rob us of the faith in the Triune God. Let us not be deceived by the so-called higher critics who reproduce the same arguments in our days against the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that were defeated in the Christian Church as early as 325.

Let us always heed Paul's warning to Timothy, as written in 1 Timothy 6:20–21, *[Keep] what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge — ²¹ by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.*

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,³

Let God the Father be adored,
And God the Son, the only Lord,
And God the Holy Spirit be
Adored throughout eternity. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

² 1 Corinthians 8:4

³ 536 ALHB