

We believe in the Triune God

January 15, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Well, I have some good news for you this morning. According to a University of Lethbridge study: “God is still doing reasonably well in the polls.”

That’s the headline of a press release from a study that one of its professors did. This professor, Reginald Bibby, has been charting religious belief in Canada since the 1970’s and as of 2020, some sixty percent of Canadians continue to believe in God. I’ve put a link to the study on Facebook so you can see the numbers yourself – (32% think that there is definitely a God, 27% think probably) neat to see the breakdown by geography and gender and education too.

What I’d be interested in knowing though is what exactly do people mean when they say they believe in ‘God.’ Do they believe in the God that the Bible describes? Do they believe in Jehovah? Do they believe in Allah? A world spirit? Some sort of divine power? You can say that you believe in God, but what exactly does that mean?

We’re going to spend today thinking about that question and talking about what we believe here at Langford church. You’ll see it there in the handout. Point 2. Let’s read it together.

“We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

That’s what we believe about God and what we believe shapes how we act, so let’s look at this statement of our faith and talk about what it means for us as we live in this world.

So first, we believe in one God.

To say that we believe in one God puts us in a long line of monotheists – people who believe in one (mono) God (theists). You probably know this – a lot of people, from way way back and up to today believe that there are many gods. The ancients Greeks for example believed in a god who was charge of war, another who was in charge of peace, another in charge of harvest, another in charge of childbirth, right down to a god of beekeeping.

But then along came the Jewish people who said that there was only one God who was in charge of ALL of those things. They insisted that God has spoken to them and revealed to them that there was no other god but Him. Admittedly, the Bible does seem to indicate that there are ‘lesser gods’ and powers and authorities but they are powerless before the sovereign God of all – to the point that we can reasonably say ‘there is ONE God.’ He alone is God and He alone is worthy of worship and trust.

This conviction found its way into the Bible in a very famous couple of verses, verses that became crucial for Jewish religion, and that Jesus Himself quoted. That’s Deuteronomy 6:4-5,

which Jewish people know as the 'shema.' 'Shema' just means 'listen to' or 'hear this' and that's the first word of this verse -

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Implication – there is ONE God).

5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Isaiah 45 says something similar. In chapter 45:5-6, God says - 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,

6 so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.

When God says 'listen!' we listen. And we discover that there is only one God – the God of the Bible. And we realize that He alone deserves our undivided attention. And so, we at Langford believe that there is ONE GOD who deserves to be loved with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

Now it's interesting to me that our statement of faith leaves out something at this point that appears in the Apostles' Creed. Can you figure out what it is? It's that the one God is the Creator God, almighty maker of Heaven and Earth. Now just because it's not in our statement of faith, doesn't mean we don't believe it. We do. We believe whole-heartedly that the One God is the Creator God who created everything there is. There are socio-historical reasons why that doesn't appear in our statement of faith, but it's certainly implied by the existence of only one God. If He didn't create the world, then who did?

We believe in one God who created all things.

And not only that, we believe that that one God who created all things has always existed. "We believe that there is one God, [who is] eternally existent..."

Right off the bat, the Bible tells us so. Genesis 1:1 – 'In the beginning, God...' God was already there. Before everything, He was.

Psalm 90 verse 2 say: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

And then of course, there's Revelation 1:8, God says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Again and again, the Bible tells us that God has always existed; He has no beginning and no end. He just 'is.'

So we believe in one God who has always existed.

Now, here's where things get interesting.

"We believe that there is one God, eternally existent [who has always existed] in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." We believe in the Trinity, that God was and is and will always be the Triune God.

Now, understandably, your first reaction might be to say – 'Well, wait. How can ONE God exist in three persons? That doesn't fit my definition of God.'

I'd say two things to that: 1. This is one of those places where we apply the authority of the Bible that we talked about last week. The Bible is God's trustworthy word and in it, He describes Himself as one in three and so we affirm that. We do our best to understand but when all is said and done, we take Him at His Word and trust that He knows what He's talking about when He's describing Himself.

2. Who says a God can't exist in three persons? Awhile back, I was listening to a lecture series on dinosaurs and I learned some really neat things about how they're discovered and identified. I'll just share one little thing – did you know that sometimes paleontologists will dig up some bones and then say 'oh, that belongs to a so-and-so (a dinosaur that they know already exists).' But then they keep digging and discover more and realize that it's not the thing they thought they knew; it's an entirely new thing.

Just to give you an example – a little while back, a group of paleontologists were digging in New Mexico and they found the skull of a big horned dinosaur. They thought about what they knew about big horned dinosaurs like this one and said 'oh, this must be a pentaceratops, just like all the other ones we've ever seen.' Some time later, they were looking more closely at this big horned skull and realized – 'this isn't just any old pentaceratops; this is a brand new species' which they named *Bisticeratops froeseorum* (named after where it was found in the Bisti Wilderness.ⁱ

Same thing here. We might struggle with the idea of God being three persons because we're trying to make 'God' into something we already know. He doesn't fit our conception of what 'a god' is. But if when we keep digging, we realize that this is not any old god that we knew before, this God is an entirely new thing. And it turns out that this God exists in three persons.

Now, why do we say that? Why do we say that God exists eternally in three persons? Ie, He has always been and will always be 'Father-Son-Holy Spirit.'

Well, essentially we believe that because the Bible identifies three unique persons as God, not three gods, but three equal, same-in-essence beings who are each God and who are together God. You can see that in the illustration in the bulletin.ⁱⁱ This is the classic depiction of the Trinity – the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father and yet they are each God and they are together God. Where do we get that idea?

Well, again, we go to Scripture.

And there we find that the Father is called God again and again. Twelve times in fact the phrase 'God the Father' appears in the Bible and the phrase 'God our Father' appears about a dozen times more. Just to give you an example, 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 says:

"For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live."

So it's not really controversial to say that the Father is God. What about the Son?

You probably know that one of the reasons that Jesus was crucified is that He was saying that He was the Father's Son and so putting Himself on equal footing with the Father. John 5:18 says this:

18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18 NIV).

Now they didn't like that, but the reality is, it was true. God the Son is equal with God the Father. Philippians 2 says it quite succinctly – Philippians 2:6 says He was "...in very nature God, [and yet He] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped..." implying that He is equal with God and thus God.

So God the Father is God, God the Son is God; what about God the Spirit?

Now I'll admit that I was late to the game on this one. I remember when I was younger thinking that the Holy Spirit was an 'it,' like some sort of impersonal force. The Holy Spirit was this 'thing' that was just there. And I have to admit that I was a little shocked when I first heard somebody refer to the Holy Spirit as a 'he' – as a person – but turns out they were right.

Jesus Himself refers to the Holy Spirit as 'He' a number of times. For example, John 16:13, Jesus says "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." The Holy Spirit is a 'HE' – He is a person with will and emotion and personality.

And not only that, HE is God. The clearest reference here is in Acts 5 when Peter says that lying to the Spirit is in reality lying to Godⁱⁱⁱ and so we take that to mean that the Spirit is God too.

In addition to that, there are what we call these 'Trinitarian formulas' in the Bible – times where Father, Son and Spirit are referred to altogether as equals. Some of these are quite famous.

For example, Matthew 28:19 says: 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (Mat 28:19 NIV). I.e. into the name (singular) of three persons (plural).

The opening verses of 1 Peter are the same. Peter calls the people he's writing to you "...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

Passages like these hold Father, Son and Spirit together as God, affirming that each of them is also uniquely God.

Now admittedly, this is something that Christians have struggled to understand down through the ages. And sometimes people have proposed things that just don't work.

So for example, in order to maintain the 'oneness of God' some people have suggested that maybe Jesus was not actually God. They thought maybe Jesus was created by God and so the Father is the one true God and Jesus is just His Son/agent (Arianism) – not equal to God in Himself. Interesting idea but the problem is that Jesus is not a created being. He has always existed. John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." So He can't be created because He created all things and can't create Himself.^{iv}

Some people have suggested that maybe Jesus was just a guy and God put His power on Him (dynamic monarchism). Again it preserves the 'oneness of God' but two things there – 1. Again, John 1, Jesus existed before Creation, so He can't have just been a human guy that God empowered and 2. Passages like Philippians 2, John 3:16 for that matter say that the Father SENT the Son; not the Father sent His power to a guy He later called the Son. Jesus was God when He left Heaven and was still God on Earth.

On the Threeness side, some people have suggested that maybe Father, Son and Spirit are just the one God manifesting Himself in different ways at different times (modalism). Sometimes He's the Father, sometimes He's the Son, sometimes He's the Spirit.

Like you know how on Polka-Dot door when the male co-host would go off screen and then Polkaroo would come in and the leave and the male host would come back and say 'ah, I missed him?' I don't want to spoil things for anybody, but the guy was in the Polkaroo costume. Couldn't be in two places at once because he's only one guy appearing in different ways. Could that explain the Trinity – one God appearing in different times and places as different persons?^v That doesn't work because sometimes because Father, Son and Spirit all show up together, like at Jesus' baptism.^{vi} The persons of the Trinity are not expressions of one God, they are each God and together God.

So how do we hold this together? How do we affirm that there is One God who has always existed in Three unique persons?

Well, I would put it like this, borrowing the theological language that the Church has used since the three hundreds A.D.: God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit share the same divine essence. They are existentially equal and so they are both together and individually God.

That being said, they each have unique focuses in the story of Creation, Redemption and Restoration and they work together to accomplish the shared will of God.

1 Peter 1 is actually quite helpful here and I'd encourage you to turn to it. 1 Peter 1 towards the back of your Bible:

NIV 1 Peter 1:1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout [what is now essentially Turkey]

2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

This is another one of those Trinitarian formulas where Father Son and Holy Spirit appear in conjunction, implying that they are equal. Notice though that they each accomplish different things.

God the Father is the sovereign overseer. Verse 2 – they have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. I always like to think of the Father as the architect of the plan of salvation, spearheading and laying out the parameters for the project. That's God the Father –

God the Son is the builder, the one who puts the plan into action. By His blood and through His resurrection, He saves us from sin and restores us to relationship with God and gives us a living hope. God the Father is the sovereign architect, God the Son is the saving builder –

God the Spirit is the sanctifying mover who brings us into the salvation life that God the Father planned and God the Son constructed. The Spirit convicts us of our sin and empowers us to turn from it and turn to God and to live in light of Him from there on out – that's what sanctification means – becoming holy and living holy (in a holy manner).

So 1 Peter tells us that each person of the Trinity has a different area of focus – the Father is Sovereign, the Son is the Saviour, the Spirit is the sanctifier – but since they are each God and all God they play a part in each other's work: The Father gives us new birth through the salvation of Jesus; the Spirit enables us to live in obedience to Jesus. Together then they accomplish salvation, even as each focuses on a different part.

Which means that that we believe in the sovereign, saving, sanctifying God. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now, what does that mean for our lives? Let me give you a handful of implications, both in terms of the oneness of God and Threeness of God.

1. First, oneness. Here I think we need to learn from Jesus and listen to the Shema – ‘4 Hear, O [people]: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength’ (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV).

We at Langford believe in one God who deserves undivided attention. And I don’t think that anybody has a little wooden idol in their homes, but we still may harbour idols in our hearts. If we love our careers, our hobbies, our ideologies more than we love God, then we are not loving God with all our heart and mind and strength. If we believe in one God then He deserves the primary place in our lives.

2. We believe that the Father is God. Which means that no matter what your family thinks of you, you have a loving heavenly Father who cares deeply for you. In fact, unlike other world religions, God didn’t create us to be His servants or His companions; He created us to experience the love and fellowship that has always existed within the eternal Trinity. When we didn’t love Him back, rather than shaking the etch-a-sketch and starting over, He sent His Son, again out of love to redeem us and reconcile us to Him. We have a Father who loves us so deeply that He sent His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will live with Him forever. The Triune God loves you more than you can ever know.

3. We believe that the Son is God. Which means that your God is personally committed to and actively involved in your spiritual wellbeing. You know the old saying – in terms of breakfast, the chicken makes a contribution; the pig is committed. Weirdly, that applies here. God the Son is so committed to you that He left behind the glories of Heaven, took on flesh and dwelt on earth and laid down His life in place of ours so that our sins were forgiven. This is not some far-off deity disinterested in us; God the Son is our Saviour who is so absolutely committed to our salvation that He gave Himself to secure it. Let that inspire devotion in your heart.

And 4. We believe that the Spirit is God. And again, the fact that the Spirit is God means that your God is deeply invested in your spiritual health. God didn’t just save us and say – ‘ok, here’s some rules to follow; don’t mess it up.’ He gave us each His Spirit to dwell within us and to lead us and guide us every day. God the Spirit is at work in you, 24/7, giving the ability “... to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:12 NIV). The Spirit is working in you to refine you, to sanctify you, so that your relationships, your interactions with others, your decision making will reflect the goodness of God more and more. God the Spirit is actively helping you to honour God with all your heart and mind and strength.

Which brings me to my final application.^{vii} 5. When we pray, we can pray to all three persons of the Trinity, knowing that we are ultimately praying to God. If you listen to my praying, I'm often doing just that. If I'm praying big picture things, about Creation, about the world, about God's will, I'll usually pray 'to the Father.' When I pray about salvation things, like the Cross and redemption, you'll hear me pray 'to the Son.' It drives me crazy when people pray – 'Father, thank you for dying for us.' That's modalism – the Polkaroo problem – God the Son died for us. So I think it's appropriate that we think about what we're praying. And when I'm praying about life in general, for strength, wisdom, against temptation, I'm usually praying to 'God the Spirit.' Now that doesn't mean I'm thinking about them as three separate Gods; ultimately I'm praying 'to the Father, through the Spirit, in Jesus' name,' but I think it's appropriate to pray to Father, Son or Spirit if that makes sense.

We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Just think: If God is a Trinity, then you have a loving Father whose love for you is greater than any other love you'd ever experience. *If God is a Trinity, then you have a gracious Saviour who is deeply, actively and personally committed to your salvation – He died to give you life.* If He did that He will not let you down otherwise. And if God is a Trinity, then you have the very Spirit of God in you to give you strength and lead you in paths of righteousness. Rather than wrestling with the idea of the Trinity, embrace the Triune God and let Him do His multifaceted work in your life.

We believe in the sovereign, saving, sanctifying God.^{viii}

BENEDICTION

14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2Co 13:14 NIV).

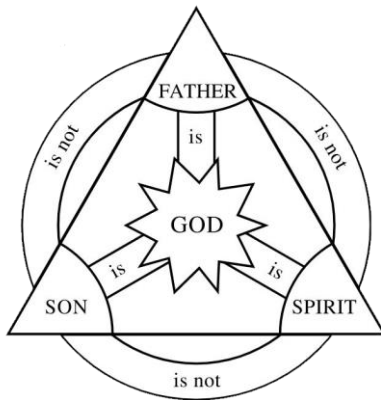
ⁱFor more info:

*https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362680358_A_new_chasmosaurine_ceratopsid_from_the_Upper_Cretaceous_Campanian_Farmington_Member_of_the_Kirtland_Formation_New_Mexico

*<https://www.sci.news/paleontology/bisticeratops-froeseorum-11125.html>

*<https://www.kunm.org/local-news/2022-08-25/misidentified-for-decades-one-new-mexico-fossil-led-to-the-eventual-discovery-of-a-new-dinosaur>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shield_of_the_Trinity#/media/File:Shield-Trinity-Scutum-Fidei-earliest-and-latest-major-variants.svg



ⁱⁱⁱ 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

(Act 5:3-4 NIV).

^{iv} And while we're here, let me just mention too that Genesis 1:2 says that the Holy Spirit was there too. 'The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters' before Creation. So there you've got all three – Father-Son-and-Holy Spirit together in eternity. One God eternally existent in Three persons.

^v There's a variant of this called Sabellianism that suggests that God was the Father during the era of Creation, God was the Son during the era of redemption and God is the Spirit now in the era of the church. Same as modalism, this doesn't work: all three persons appear simultaneously in the Bible and the NT assumes that all three are working in harmony even now.

^{vi} 16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." [GG: Must be the Father speaking because He refers to Jesus as His *Son*) (Mat 3:16-17 NIV).

^{vii} Another application which I may or may not use, depending on time, has to do with preaching. When we read the Bible, when I'm speaking, we are hearing the Word of the Father, telling us about the work of the Son and all that it means for us and the Spirit is working to apply that in our lives. I don't mind if you zone out for a minute while I'm preaching (I mean, if you zone out to think about your grocery list, I don't love that) but if I say something or read something from the Bible and you go 'wait, I need to think about that,' that's the Holy Spirit drawing something to your attention and I want you to listen. There are words coming from my heart but it ultimately you and the Holy Spirit who need to work them into your lives.