

“Not Scripture Alone”
June 7, 2009
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Christianity is a wonder-full tradition. By that I mean *both* fantastic, *and* that there is plenty to wonder about in it. I wonder about the idea of the Virgin birth, the resurrection, and all those miracles performed by Christ, and then later on by the Apostles, too. Among these many things to wonder about in our tradition, the idea of God as a Trinity ranks right up there! How exactly can one God be understood to be three persons? Have you all wondered about that?

It boggles the mind, really. The idea of a threefold being who is also singular is prime material for a mental short circuit. Difficulty with the concept of the Trinity created the so-called Unitarian Controversy of the early 1800s, which led to the creation of the Unitarian Church. It split off from our parent Congregational Church. It was especially contentious in the Boston area. There, between 1819 and 1825 almost every Congregational Church went from being a traditional, or Trinitarian, Christian Church to being a Unitarian Christian Church. The Unitarians believed that God is one being and only one, and that the Holy Spirit and Jesus are not truly God. It has been said that most folks in the pews of United Church of Christ congregations even today are Unitarians. So, I thought today I would explore why I value the Trinity.

What brought the Unitarian Controversy to head, and supplied it with a central text, was a sermon by Rev. William Ellery Channing, at the ordination of Jared Sparks on May 5, 1819. This address was so well received that it soon became widely circulated as a booklet that came to be called *Unitarian Christianity*. Now friends, the next time you think *our* service is running a bit long, imagine this: *Unitarian Christianity* was forty *pages* long! That’s almost the length of 13 of my sermons. Needless to say, it was full of long arguments. Fear not, I will not be recounting them in full. But the most salient of Channing’s basic argument against the Trinity focused on two things.

First, Channing observes that the idea of the Trinity is not found in Scripture. Throughout his career, Channing’s defense of scripture demonstrated clearly how seriously he took the Protestant ideal of *sola scriptura*, or *scripture alone* in terms of Biblical interpretation. Like many Protestants, Channing was quick to dismiss ideas that seemed to develop outside of the Bible. And here, although I am loath to admit it, Channing pretty much has us. He’s right. The Gospel of John comes the closest of any Christian Scripture to naming Christ, the Holy Spirit and God as connected together. Today’s passage at least mentions them all within the same chapter. Other passages from John have Jesus saying quite clearly that he and God are one.¹ But we don’t get the same language for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is described as an Advocate who

¹ John 1:1-2, 14; 10:30, etc.

will be sent from God, but not as being one with God.² So, Channing is absolutely correct to say that the Trinity is not found in Scripture; at least not completely.

His second argument is that the idea of the Trinity is unreasonable. Reason was the chief theological tool for historical Unitarian Christians like Channing. He said this about our capacity to reason:

Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our own peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings.³

For Channing, our intellectual capabilities are nothing less than the very image of God within us.⁴ Anything which offends our intellectual sensibilities is therefore offensive to God as well. So, since the idea of the Trinity challenged Channing's intellectual sensibilities, it must also have challenged God's truth as Channing understood it.

On this second point I think Channing misses the mark. Pretty widely. To suggest that intellect alone helps us to discern God's truth, and even that it somehow bears God's image, assumes an innate moral goodness in intellect. I don't buy it. Many human failings have directly resulted from intellect. The creation of the nuclear bomb; a tax system that favors the rich and often neglects the poor; and the justification of torture can all be traced to so-called reasoning. And that's just to name three things.

We must reason in a broader and more ancient sense when we seek to know God. Not just with our minds, as Channing and many since have assumed, but with our hearts, our minds, our experiences, and indeed our whole beings. Restricting our apprehension of God to our minds limits our ability to encounter God more fully. We must not only think about God, we must also feel God in our lives, and *act* on God's place there. The experiences of our lives will inevitably change and deepen our relationships with God—and well they should. Moses did not simply think God, he met God in a burning bush. Jesus did not simply rationalize God as some abstract possibility, but felt and encountered God within. God is a verb; an experience; a being and doing; not some logic or math problem.

And this is where Channing falters on understanding the Trinity: he seeks to *understand* the Trinity. He is so caught in his own mental machinations that he does not allow room for his heart to feel God. Because he cannot conceive of God other than rationally, he limits his ability to

² John 15:26.

³ "Unitarian Christianity," from *William Ellery Channing, Selected Writings*, Edited by David Robinson (Paulist Press: New York, 1985), Pg. 76.

⁴ See Channing's writing "Likeness to God," from *William Ellery Channing, Selected Writings*, Edited by David Robinson (Paulist Press: New York, 1985), Pg. 145 and following.

experience God in a variety of ways. He's right, the idea of the Trinity is not fully represented in any given Biblical text. But, thanks be to God, we found our ways to the idea through individual experience and a shared tradition. A God who is Three-in-One is automatically beyond our ability to put in a box. It *doesn't* make sense. It doesn't have to, because it makes *meaning* in our lives. We feel the majesty of our Creator in experiences in nature, or with other animals, or each other. The companionship of Jesus can be felt when we, too, feel God stirring within us and calling us to acts of love and justice. Or when we pray to Jesus by name and feel him—inexplicably and unreasonably—*with us*. The promptings of the Holy Spirit can be demonstrated when any of us are suddenly moved to help someone who needs it just because we can, and no one else seems willing or able. And the fact that we can, *and do*, encounter God in so many ways reminds us that our God is eternal, never fully known, and always ready to surprise us with a new way to know her or him.

It is *not* in scripture alone that we meet our God, but in every part of our lives which we will open up. There is no wrapping our minds around God. God *must* be understood broadly, because God is so much bigger than our ideas about God. And that's the good news of the Trinity this Sunday morning.

Amen?

John 3:7-17

7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.