

*Genesis 1:1–5 (NIV)*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. <sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

*Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (NIV)*

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

*John 1:1–5 (NIV)*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

*Colossians 1:15–20 (NIV)*

<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

*1 John 4:16–21 (NRSV)*

<sup>16b</sup> God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup> Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

*When we bring the entirety of the biblical story together,  
this self-revelation of God, we learn that God is both One & Three.*

The ancient Jews were radically monotheistic, proclaiming that there was only one God, who had come to Abraham and to Moses and had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. This is non-negotiable and they promised to be true to this one God, knowing that the plethora of pagan deities offered were but figments of active spiritual

imaginings. But then came Jesus, born to Mary, crucified, and risen. And soon the earliest followers of Jesus, all of them Jewish, found themselves speaking of Jesus as they had only spoken of God, worshiping Jesus as they had only worshiped God. Did they give up their monotheism? . . . Not for a moment. Rather, they came to understand that Jesus had revealed to them that God was and had always been a tri-unity, relational in God's very being. One + Three.

As in much Christian theology, we don't have to and, indeed, must not choose between "One" and "Three." The Christian faith is built on a series of "ANDs" not "ORs." God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. Salvation is instantaneous AND a process. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we must *choose* one or the other. Roger Olsen's excellent book, *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs*, is an overview of the history of Christian theology and is organized into twenty-two chapters, each one devoted to a theological "AND."

*Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between the ORs is essential to grasping the biblical message.*

But really, we ask, what is going on? Let's begin to get at that question by asking ourselves a question.

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God? What would you most want them to know?

Pause before you answer, for you'll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, "God is great." You would probably soon find yourself talking about God's creation of the cosmos and his control of it. Or you might begin with "God is good" and launch into a discussion of good and evil, morality and ethics.

But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God (and you are answering these God-questions as a Christian), then what does Jesus' incarnation reveal to us about God's greatness or even his goodness? You probably don't need the baby Jesus to know that God is great or to know that God is good, for there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures to show both of those statements are true.

So what is it that we Christians have to say about God that is unique and gets to the very essence of God? **What is it that we know about God that we could not know without Jesus?**

The apostle John takes us right to the heart of the matter with the simple statement, "God is love." (see the above passage from 1 John) Note that he doesn't say, "God loves." A true statement but not unique to Christianity. John writes that God *IS* love. That in God's very being, God *is* love, God is inherently relational – three persons who love and are loved in a way and to a depth you and I cannot even imagine. This is no mere sentiment, like you might find on a blog or a bumper sticker – this is who God really is, revealed to us in the truth about Jesus. This is a statement about God that I don't think you could ever really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it.

The word "Trinity" is composed of "tri" and "unity" – triunity. But some of the oneness is lost when we shrink it to "trinity." It would be better if we used Triunity or spoke of the Triune God, for the best we can do is to proclaim that there is one and only one God, who exists in unity and oneness as three persons – Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses God's "three-in-oneness." But, really, how can this be – three and one? Why is this not just some sort of verbal mumbo-jumbo?

Augustine got it about right when he wrote that "whoever denies the Trinity is in danger of losing his salvation; whoever tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing his mind." That about sums it up.



### The Fleur-de-lis

The fleur-de-lis is in our own Rose Window. It is one of many symbols that try to convey our proclamation that God is triune – one and three. Here, there is one flower with three petals. We might have a symbol with three overlapping and interlocking rings. We might have a triangle enclosed by a circle or a circle enclosed by a triangle. Any of these symbols would suffice . . . and none of them.

We must remember that all attempts to describe the Trinity in symbols or in words fall short of the mysteries of God. We cannot fully explain how it is that there is one God and yet three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet we do proclaim just that! The Father is fully and completely God, but not all of God. Jesus is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The Holy Spirit is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The three are not to be ranked. They are not simply different manifestations of God at different times. God is truly three and one.

So, how did the Christians ever find their way to such a profound and mysterious affirmation about God?

### *The Living God – personal and triune*

When Jesus was a very young boy, he would have been taught to recite the Shema, a Jewish prayer built on a verse from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone."<sup>1</sup> As a devout Jew, Jesus would have recited this prayer morning and evening. The Shema was akin to a battle cry of oppressed Israel, who had endured centuries of foreign domination. Despite this domination, the Jews of Jesus' day remained fiercely monotheistic, making them unique in the ancient world.

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the Jews insisted that there was one, and only one, God – YHWH -- who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation's renewal. For a decade after Jesus, all the believers in Jesus were Jews, just as Jesus was a Jew. As such, these early Christians remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do. Who was this Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God?

In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is

unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God's very being. In many ways, John's gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God. From this beginning, Christians came to believe and proclaim that God is triune – one God, three persons<sup>2</sup>.

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might

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<sup>1</sup> This verse from Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Old Testament) can be translated as "the Lord is one" or "the Lord alone." We probably shouldn't take it to be an ancient Jewish statement about God's "inner being." Rather, it is a cry that there is only one God and that God is YHWH, the God of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> We use "persons," but it too is misleading – causing us to see the threeness much more than the oneness that is God. Early theologians sometimes used "subsistence" rather than "person," three "subsistences," Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This seems to me like a theologian's solution – not much help to the rest of us!

affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,<sup>3</sup>” it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

### *God is love*

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God is love. The simple statement “God is love,” seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead<sup>4</sup> live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God’s love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in one God.

This is where John Wesley’s personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: “God is love.” In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John’s brother: “Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down.”

The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (from 2:4-8).

*But if this is central to our faith, help me to understand. Three and one?*

I’ve read many attempts to explain the nature of the Trinity in words. All far short, some pretty far short. The egg yolk/egg white/eggshell and steam/water/ice analogies that we all heard in Sunday School are more harmful than helpful. The best analogy I’ve encountered is from Jeremy Begbie, a theologian at Duke Seminary and a classically trained pianist, to whose writings I was introduced by Arthur. Begbie invites us to analogize God’s three-in-oneness as three musical notes comprising a single chord – as on a piano.

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<sup>3</sup> In the UMC, we say this much more formally: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” This is from our Articles of Religion in the UMC Book of Discipline. These Articles were adopted in 1804.

<sup>4</sup> Yet another way to express God’s unity-in-threeness. You’ll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are complete or wholly sufficient. If you think that you’ve got the mysteries of the Trinity all figured out, you are wrong!

A musical chord is a harmonic set of three or more notes that is heard as one. The most common is a triad, for example, the first, third and fifth notes of a given musical scale. The chord of C major is composed of the notes C (the root of the chord), E (the third from the root) and G (the fifth from the root). Each individual note is 'a sound', and all three notes played together are likewise 'a sound'. Hence a chord is essentially three sounds in one sound, or one sound essentially composed of three different sounds (each of which has an individual identity as well as a corporate identity). By analogy, God is three divine persons in one divine personal being, or one divine personal being essentially composed of three divine persons. Further, when you strike the "C" string on a piano and allow it to resonate, the "E" string and the "G" string resonate as well. Each note of the chord dwells in the other notes at all times. Moreover, when middle C (the root of the chord) is played it 'fills' the entire 'heard space'. When the E above middle C is played at the same time, that second note simultaneously 'fills' the whole of the 'heard space'; yet one can still hear both notes distinctly. When the G above middle C is added as well, a complete chord exists; one sound composed of three distinct sounds. Begbie writes:

"What could be more apt than to speak of the Trinity as a three-note-resonance of life, mutually indwelling, without mutual exclusion and yet without merger, each occupying the same 'space,' yet recognizably and irreducibly distinct, mutually enhancing and establishing each other? To speak of three strings mutually resonating instantly introduces a dynamism ... far truer to the trinitarian, living God of the New Testament."

*Ok . . . that helps . . . but what are some ways I could go wrong here?*

There are some classical mistakes people have made when contemplating the Trinity. Peter Enns introduces us to a few:

*Tri-theism.* In early church history men such as John Ascunages and John Philoponus taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was that its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.

*Sabellianism or Modalism.* This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. A.D. 200), erred in the opposite from that of Tri-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. The teaching is thus also known as modalism because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*Arianism.* Arian doctrine [which we looked at last week] had its roots in Tertullian, who subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen carried Tertullian's concept further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father "in respect to essence." This ultimately led to Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant Christ was created by the Father. According to Arius there was a time when Christ did not exist. Arius and his teaching were condemned at the Council of Nicea in AD 325.<sup>5</sup>

*We too are relational . . . created for community*

Though a C Major chord or the fleur-de-lis focuses us on the nature of God, there is a fundamental truth about humankind here . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are

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<sup>5</sup> Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (p. 199). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love!

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We baptize our children into this community of God's people, and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew, or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. Truly, there is nothing dry or "academic" about our doctrine of the Trinity!

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Isaiah*

**No class the next two weeks: We will meet again on Aug 22**

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

**No class the next two weeks: We will meet again on Aug 23**

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week we will continue the series: *Our Family Tree – The Story of the Christian Denominations*

On Aug 14, Rev. Lauren Gerlach will be continuing the series, *Our Family Tree*

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.