

## SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY BIRKENHEAD 2020

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3 years ago 67-year-old Hank Hanegraaff and his wife entered into Orthodox Christianity at St. Nektarios Greek Orthodox Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The former Protestant was well known among evangelicals as the Bible Answer Man. Since 1989, Hanegraaff has been answering questions on Christianity, denominations, and the Bible on a nationally syndicated radio broadcast.

A champion of evangelical Christianity, he's best known for arguing against cults, heresies, and non-Christian religions. His 20 books include titles like Christianity in Crisis, Counterfeit Revival, and The Kingdom of Cults.

Part of being the Bible Answer Man also includes running the Christian Research Institute (CRI), an apologetics ministry that Hanegraaff has been president of since 1989.

There was great bemusement and even controversy in his conversion.

He described his first experience in an Eastern Orthodox service: "You open those cathedral doors and, suddenly, the smell of incense, you hear the bells, you see the icons—and it's all foreign to you, so you need some contextualization; and I think for most Protestants, they do not have that, and therefore sometimes they fear the worst." But above it all for once in my life I felt the immensity of God.

This feast of the Holy Trinity that we celebrate today is a reminder to us of the immensity which is God. Our understanding of God is partial. But on the other hand, we have an intimate relationship with God which we would defend if put to the test.

Most people want to avoid speaking about the Holy Trinity. The Orthodox tradition don't have the same issues. They are well versed in the idea of the Trinity through their liturgy, theology and most importantly their art.

For us Protestants It can much too difficult a concept to grasp. Yet we begin worship or prayer, In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We say Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. We baptise in the name of the Trinity. We say the creed which is based on the work of each part

of the Trinity. We worship in churches, like our Cathedral, whose title is The Holy Trinity. We bless people in the name of the Trinity. You see its central to our faith. We cannot get rid of it because it's embedded in what we believe. But often we seem unable to do anything with this strange teaching.

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I am sure you have heard many analogies of the Trinity which all fail in the end. For to talk of the Trinity is more than just some sort of concrete image.

For the disciples, the Trinity is about an experience. It's about experiencing the mystery of love. To experience the mystery of love is something very different from mathematical formulas. So the disciples had an experience of love. What was this experience?

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Most of them were Jews and so they knew about God. Even if they were not Jewish they would certainly be aware of a God who was other, greater than the world of mortals. They began with this experience of

someone other, greater than themselves, creator of the world. Yet this creator also loved his people and showed that love in the history of the Hebrew people.

Then the disciples had to deal with Jesus and they kept saying "if God was a human being, this is what God would be like." But they said more than that. They said "This is God who lives among us. When we look at Jesus we see God. So all that happens to Jesus happens to God." That must have really put the wind up those people who had strict laws about believing in one God.

Then after Jesus left them, they were aware of the Spirit of Jesus still in their midst. They were not left orphans, but the Spirit of God dwelt in their hearts. That's the experience of the disciples, these men and women who followed Jesus. They began talking about God who was creator, God who was Son in the person of Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit who was still with them. They knew God in this way and continued talking about God in this way.

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There is no defined doctrine of the Trinity in the scriptures, but on page after page of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and all the letters, this is the experience we hear about. Can we have that experience too? Of course we can and we do. I can

think of two ways in which we have this sort of experience.

It happens in our experience of loving and being loved. We start the process of loving with some sense of compassion for someone. We have thoughts or feelings of love towards another. Then the compassion or feeling of love may find expression as we carry out an act of love. Finally the act of love must be received. It is taken into someone else's life. That's the same sort of experience as the disciples had of the Trinity. For God is love, Trinity is love, and the same experience is ours whenever we are loving and being loved.

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We can also have the experience in prayer. When we pray, we pray to a God who is greater than we are. We pray because we believe this Divine Other can assist us, comfort us, reassure us. But we are also aware that God is within us, that Spirit of love teaching us to pray, giving us the words to say. Then we are also

conscious of the fact that Jesus, the mortal one, stands alongside us when we pray. He is too the bridge between humanity and divinity and so links us to God. Again, the Trinity is our experience when we pray.

Yes we can experience Trinity. This God who is three in one can be part of our living. Our loving and our praying are part of our experience of Trinity. When we allow God to be part of our living then we find we want to be like God and do what God wants us to do. Our Trinitarian experience then leads us to become like the Trinity. So what does it mean to be like the Trinity? I want to refer to two things that I believe are important about being like our Triune God.

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The first way we can be like God is that the Trinity is a community of persons who act together in love. That is what we are to be too; a community of persons who act together in love. We can do that by following the example of Jesus. That's where we are to look to see what love in action means. All through the Easter season we have read from the Acts of the Apostles. Time and again we have read about the early church

as it sought to make community. I know it's hard. Sometimes we squabble over things just as they did in the early church. But our driving force is to make community like the Trinity; three persons interacting in love. This central doctrine of our faith is vital to keep us on the path of seeking community by reconciliation, nurture, love; the very things Jesus did: the very things we need to do to keep relating to one another. This community life can be in the church, but can also be for any community we live in.

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The second attribute of the Trinity which the Church is to portray is equality. The Trinity consists of Three co-equal persons. What happens to one happens to the other. They have equal share in the power of love. They have no distinction between the parts. Well, that's what the doctrine says. That's what we are to be. A community of equals. Do you find the Church like that? Is your voice heard? Do all work together for

the common good? Do we seek the equality which is essential to the life of the Trinity? No, of course we don't. We struggle with it and mostly prefer not to think about equality. I know we may never reach the perfection of the equality of the Trinity in this life. None-the-less it is an attribute of the Trinity we cannot ignore. We should never loose sight of this equality and keep working towards it in hope. It is central to the Christian faith and our doctrine of the Trinity.

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As we celebrate the Feast of The Holy Trinity today remember that what you know of God is only one small part of the immensity that is our God. But that the small part is of extreme significance. That portion we know is what we have to live by. Hold it fast, treasure your understanding of God and live by it. Be willing to look at what others say about God too and so allow your own understanding to grow. Then our God becomes even more significant.

Remember too the community life of God and the equality of the persons of the Trinity. These are things we must keep on working for both in the church, and in all the groups of people we belong to. Keep looking for communities of love. Keep looking for expressions of equality. If we don't find them, then we have a responsibility to help them to come into being. Those are ways we show our life in Trinity. This Three in One God is vital to our life. The Trinity is not a dry doctrine we don't need to worry about. It is rather a dynamic movement of love we can experience and live.

May you be blessed on this Feast Day and in the future as we work together to live the Trinity in this place.