



# THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## HOLY TRINITY

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### The Exclusive Means to Overcome

1 John 5:5-12(NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>6</sup> This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup> For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup> the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. <sup>9</sup> We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. <sup>10</sup> Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. <sup>11</sup> And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup> Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Creeds are statements of beliefs, coming from the Latin word “credo” meaning “I believe.” When it comes to Christianity, creeds are formed to succinctly and clearly say what we believe without having to drop a Bible in someone's lap saying, “Read this, and you'll know what we believe.”

There are three ecumenical (or universal) creeds in the Christian Church: the Apostles', the Nicene, and, the one we brought out today, the Athanasian Creed. This creed came about in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and was named after Athanasius, a staunch defender of the Christian faith. It was prepared and used to assist Christians in teaching two things from the Bible. One was that Jesus for his whole earthly ministry and afterwards is both true God and true Man at the same time. The other is the teaching of a Triune God.

Now, the Trinity, that's a hard one to comprehend. We say in shorthand that God is three persons but one. With people who haven't grown up hearing that, you immediately have to qualify it. “So, you're saying that God is three people.” “Yes, but he's also just one God.” “So, he's divided into three parts?” “No, all three are God but all three are separate as well.” “So, you're saying that there are three gods.” “No, they are three people but one God.” “So, he appears in three different ways but is still one God.” “No, that's not quite it either. God is three people – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – and at the same time is one God.” “That doesn't make sense.” “I know.” And now you know why the Athanasian Creed is worded like it is, clarifying the language so as to not be misunderstood about this concept of who God is even though our minds don't fully grasp it.

There is no one else in this world who is three-in-one as the Triune God of the Bible is. This chafes us a little bit because we like to categorize everything and put it into nice little boxes. We make analogies to try to help people understand, but all the analogies to help understand that God is Triune fall short.

Knowing that the concept of the Trinity goes beyond us, did it make you feel a little uncomfortable expressing your faith with the words of the Athanasian Creed, when you said, “Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity,” and “Whoever wishes to be saved, must above all else, hold to the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep this faith pure in all points will certainly perish forever”? I know that every time that I look at this creed, I ask myself, “Can I say this out loud?”

There is a part of me that kicks against such statements. This past week, I went door to door in our community with the missionaries from Truth in Love Ministry. We were sharing the message that God demands perfection from us and that Jesus is that perfection for us done in our place. As we asked people the question, “What does it mean to you when you hear the phrase, ‘Be ye perfect’?” many people answered something to the effect of “All religions are good” or “There's not just one way” or “Faith / religion is a personal experience that you can't say is right or wrong.”

Admittedly, a part of me wanted to agree and move on. Why? Because I want them all to be saved without having to tell them on their doorstep that they are wrong and going to hell. I don't want to say that because I know it will probably stop the conversation dead in its tracks and that person might never step foot in our church. So, should I just agree with them? Can I honestly say that their faith, their religious outlook on life, will save them in the end? If I don't share this, will they go to hell?

God is exclusive, isn't he, and so is the eternal life he offers? The Apostles John wrote, “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (verse 5) “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (verse 12) God does not leave the door open that people who believe in something or someone other than him also

has eternal life. No, he tells us very clearly that if you do not believe in Jesus, who he is, what he has done, then you do not have life. In fact, you have eternal death.

The world does not want exclusivity when it comes to faith, God, and the afterlife because the world does not want to be judged. Rather, the world wants to judge us, condemn us if we hold to an exclusive belief in an exclusive God who exclusively provides salvation to the world. How dare you tell me that what I believe is wrong?! The world wants to overcome us and our beliefs by pushing down and ignoring any concept of exclusivity when it comes to God and life after death. We start to be overcome by the world as we nod our heads and agree with people because we don't want to argue or debate or think anyone is going to hell.

Logically, it doesn't work to say all religions are good or have many paths to the same goal. Religions without this exclusive Triune God directly contradict each other. So, one has to be right because they all can't be right. God does not say, "Believe in whatever you want because it's all good," but instead says, "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (verse 5) He is an exclusive God with exclusive life after death given by exclusive means. No other religion has a God who is three people but still one God. Jesus is God. The Father is God. The Holy Spirit is God. How do we know? "This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement" (verses 6-8)

What are these three and how do they testify that Jesus Christ is the Son of God? The water refers to Jesus' baptism by John. On that day when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus in the form of a dove and lighting. God the Father spoke from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) All three persons of the godhead were there, approving of what was happening. The blood is a reference to Jesus' death on the cross. When everything had been accomplished, Jesus definitively said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) Still the Son of God and God himself, he said in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46) and then gave up his life. His earthly ministry was accomplished. Perfection had been lived for us. His life was sacrificed to pay the debt of our sins. The accomplishment was verified when the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all participated in raising Jesus from the dead. The Spirit testifies in agreement because he made sure that these words and these truths and these events were recorded and preserved for us so that we would believe them.

The Spirit's testimony continues today when hearts, our hearts, are changed by the hearing of these truths, hearing what Christ has done for us. The Spirit testifies that Jesus is our perfect Savior substitute as he works through simple water and words to put his name on us in baptism, the name of the Triune God. We were baptized exclusively in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit so that we would belong only to him. This Triune God washed away my sins, clothed me with his perfection that was lived for me, gave me life eternal through my baptism because he paid for my sins. The Holy Spirit testifies through the Supper that God the Son gave us, that when we eat and drink this bread and this wine, he is giving us Jesus' body and blood at the same time for the forgiveness of my sins and the increase of my trust in him as my exclusive Savior who is separate from the Father and the Holy Spirit but is still one God with them. The Triune God exclusively worked together to save me and all people! "Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." (verses 10-11)

I can repeat that God is Triune over and over again to you, but should I die on the hill of the Trinity concept as I hear people say that all religions are good? Should any of us die on this hill, this teaching? Well, yeah, because he is an exclusive God who offers eternal life as no one else does or can. If we believe in any other god that is not this three-in-one God, then we have something less than the Savior that is needed, we have something less than God. If we do not take God at his Word that he is three separate and distinct persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – but is still just one God, we are calling him a liar. We are forfeiting the eternal life that he offers. So, we do die on the hill of teaching the Triune God, just as Athanasius was willing to do.

But don't make this the teaching of the Trinity the first hill to die on. This is a teaching that is ultimately only accepted by faith – not by reason, not by argument, but by the testimony of God, the testimony that the Holy Spirit works through. So we have to tell people about our God, knowing that as exclusive as he is, he gives something that no one else can or does give – eternal life!

God is exclusive as to who he is. No other being, no other entity is like him nor can be like him. That's kind of the proof that he really is the one true God. Only this Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – has overcome the world. He has gained the victory, and only he can give it to us. When we believe that Jesus is this unique Triune God, we have that exclusive victory of overcoming the world. Amen.