

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 1, 2015

THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH (4)
NO GOD BUT GOD

Deuteronomy 4:32-40

As we continue to think together about the essentials of our faith, I want to begin today with a few definitions that, for many of you, may all be very elementary. Nevertheless

A *monotheist* is a person who believes in one God. Christianity is a *monotheistic* faith. As are Judaism and Islam, though there are profound differences between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in what we believe about God, especially concerning the identity of Jesus Christ, whom we believe to be the eternal Son of God and the Savior of sinners. We'll get into the specifics of what is said of Jesus in the EPC *Essentials* next Sunday.

In contrast to *monotheism*, which is the belief in one God, *polytheism* is the belief in multiple or many gods. *Pantheism* is the belief that everything that exists is divine. Everything is god. Or, in another sense, everything is part of god. *Everything*. *Atheism*, on the other hand, is the belief that God does not exist. An *atheist* takes it as an article of faith that there is no God. Though they are often confused with each other and thrown together in the same pot, *atheism* and *agnosticism* are not the same. While an *atheist* denies that God exists, an *agnostic* professes to be unsure and, if God does exist, the *agnostic* lacks certitude about what God is really like. In response to the questions, "Does God exist?" the *atheist* answers with a definitive, "No," while the *agnostic* says, "I don't know." It is this lack of certainty, not a stubborn refusal to believe in God, that defines *agnosticism*.

You have heard it said that there are no atheists in foxholes. Actually, there are really no atheists anywhere. David Foster Wallace, an award-winning, best-selling novelist who, sadly, took his own life in 2008 at the age of 46, made this argument in a commencement address he gave at Kenyon College (Ohio), in 2005, in which he said: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship."

Wallace was right: Everybody worships *something* or *someone*. This was a well-accepted truth in ancient Athens, as we saw last Sunday in Acts 17. It remains true today: Everybody everywhere worships someone or something, including atheists who say there is no god.

Because we are natural-born worshipers, and because our hearts are so easily drawn to the worship of false gods, Moses insistently declares to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 4 that there is only one true and living God. God did what He did for His people, Moses says – He rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, He demonstrated His mighty power and His great love for them, He chose them as His very own people and brought them to the land He would give them as their inheritance – He did all these things and more so that they would know and believe, as Moses says in verse 35, "that the LORD is God; besides Him there is no other." Moses then drives the point home in verse 39, charging the entire nation to

“acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.”

The Bible is unrelenting on this point. The Lord Himself says through the prophet Isaiah:

I am the first and the last;
 apart from me there is no God.
 Who then is like me?
 Let him proclaim it.
 Is there any God besides me?
 No, there is no other Rock.
 (Isaiah 44:6-8)

Though we are so inclined in our fallen human nature to worship false gods, there is only one true and living God, and we are to worship, love, serve, follow, trust, and obey Him only. As we noted last week, our knowledge of God is finite. It is partial. It is incomplete. We do not and cannot know everything there is to know about God. But the knowledge God gives us about Himself is true and reliable. And sufficient.

You cannot reduce God to a principle. Or an idea. God is not a philosophy. God is not a doctrine. God is not a “thing.” God is not a force invoked by jedi knights. God is not a superhero who comes to our rescue just in the nick of time. God is not a scientific equation. God is not “the Man upstairs” or “the Big Guy up in the sky.” God is not a creation of our imagination.

According to the Bible, God is a *real, living, personal Being* who can be known personally. We can know God personally because He has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to us, as I said last week, in the world He has made and which He continues to sustain, in history (which from beginning to end is *His* story, not mine or yours), in the Bible (which is the Word of God), and supremely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God-in-flesh-and-blood, who, to show the depth of His love for us, willingly gave His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He has done all this because He desires to be known by us. By you. And me. Personally.

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Among the attributes of God He has made known to us are these:

God is *omnipotent* or *all-powerful*. He is not weak. He has the power to do all that He desires to do, and nothing stands outside the scope of His sovereign control. Nothing. And no one.

God is *omnipresent* or *fully present everywhere*. He is not distant. As David marveled in Psalm 139, there is nowhere we can go where God is not already present.

God is *omniscient* or *all-knowing*. He is not out of touch or unaware of anything. God knows everything. This means, as Bill Hybels has written, no question can confound Him. No

dilemma can confuse Him. No event can surprise Him. Nothing that can ever happen to you can catch God off-guard, because He has eternal, intrinsic, comprehensive, and absolutely perfect knowledge. Nothing is news to God. (Hybels, *The God You're Looking For*, 6.)

This means that God knows you intimately. He knows everything about you. He knows your secrets. He knows your scars. He knows your service. He knows your fears. He knows your tears. He knows your dreams. He knows your disappointments. He knows your heart. He sees what no one else sees. And *He loves you*. Completely. Unconditionally. Sacrificially. It is just the way He is.

Because of His great love for us, God is *gracious* and *merciful* in His dealings with us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us in full for all our wrongs (Psalm 103:8, 10). The Bible declares that not only is God *holy*, He is *holy, holy, holy* (Isaiah 6:3). He is completely *just* and *wise* and *good*. He is, as the hymn says, “perfect in power, in love and purity.”

We also know that God is *unchanging* and *unchangeable* in His attributes. As the hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* reminds us, as God has been, He forever will be. J. I. Packer points out in *Knowing God* (68-73) that God’s *life* does not change; from everlasting to everlasting, He is, and He is God (Psalm 90:2). God’s *character* does not change; He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). God’s *truth* does not change. God’s *purposes* do not change.

THE TRINITY: GOD IN THREE PERSONS

All these things are true, and should move us to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). But what about the doctrine of the Trinity? Where does it fit in all of this? How are we to make sense of it? John Stott says it is “the greatest mystery of the Christian faith” (Stott, *Christian Basics*, 53). Packer calls it “the most dizzying and unfathomable truth of all” (Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian*, 29).

We believe in one God who exists eternally in three persons. We believe in the one true and living God whose “Christian name,” as theologian Karl Barth put it, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The historic formulation of the Trinity is that God is one in essence or substance and three in person, with all three persons of the Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – possessing all the attributes of deity.

Our belief in the Trinity has led some to mistakenly accuse Christians of polytheism – that is, the worship of multiple gods. It is not difficult to understand this charge, because the math doesn’t seem to add up. How, it may be asked, can God be both three and one? It is a mystery that defies our full understanding. As Packer admits, how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be personally distinct and yet one in essence is more than we can know (*I Want to Be a Christian*, 29). This much we can say: The doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that $3 = 1$ in a mathematical sense.

Just because the concept of the Trinity is beyond the limits of our understanding does not mean it isn't true. While you won't find the word *Trinity* in the Bible, the New Testament, as John Stott asserts, is "Trinitarian through and through." He says: "Think how Jesus, when He was baptized to inaugurate His public ministry, heard the Father's voice and saw the Spirit descending on Him like a dove, and how at the end, after His resurrection, He commissioned His church to make disciples and baptize them into the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19). Consider too Peter's statement that we 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" (1 Peter 1:2), and Paul's prayer that "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" might be with us all (2 Corinthians 13:14). (Stott, *Christian Basics*, 54).

I am not going to try to prove the doctrine of the Trinity to you this morning. I simply want to say that the Bible declares and affirms both the oneness of God *and* the full deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We do not worship three gods. We do not worship one God with three heads. We worship one God who is three persons. One God eternally existing in three persons. We believe and affirm the doctrine of the Trinity not because we can explain it to everyone's satisfaction but because it is clearly deduced from the teaching of God's Word.

We believe in the one true and living God. We believe in God the Father, the Maker of the heavens and the earth, the Creator of everything there is, the One who sustains all things by the power of His word, who loves us with an everlasting love, and who sovereignly and graciously initiated the plan of salvation to bring us back into a right relationship with Him when we fell into sin.

We believe in Jesus Christ, God the Son, who became a man in order to carry out the plan of salvation.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who is God with us here and now, sent from the Father and the Son to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts, to take up residence in our hearts, to transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ, to work in us and through us to fulfill God's purposes for us.

We will talk more about God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as we continue our study of the *Essentials of Our Faith*.

SO WHAT?

Before I close, let me say this: I fear that some of us may dismiss some or even all of what I've said today as nothing more than "textbook theology" with no connection to real life in the real world as we know it. I hope with all my heart that is not the case.

You see, what God has revealed to us of Himself and His character and His ways is not just a topic that some people find interesting to think about or talk about. It is way more than that. It is an essential of the highest order. It has consequences for life here and now. It has

consequences for eternity. The significance of what God has revealed of Himself to us, the weight and worth of what we know and understand and believe about God, will be lost on us unless and until we are moved at the center of our beings, first of all, to recognize who God is and acknowledge His claim on our lives, to repent of our sins in true humility and sincerity, to surrender the totality of who we are to God's sovereign and gracious rule in our lives, and to trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and second person of the Trinity, and His saving work on the cross for us. The wonder of who God is in His triune nature, in the attributes of His Being and character, and in all He has done in the power of His love and grace for us, will be wasted on you and me unless and until we respond to Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength in worship, adoration, praise, devotion, love, and service.

The only proper response, when God has made Himself known to us, when we have met the true and living God, when we have come to know who God is, what He is like, and what He has done for us in His redeeming love, is this:

- To accept and take to heart the truth that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below, and there is no other God (Deuteronomy 4:39);
- To give unceasing thanks and praise to the one true and living God, who exists eternally in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and
- To offer our lives – ourselves – with gladness and joy as living sacrifices, which are pleasing and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). Why? Because He is worthy. And because in doing so you will discover the meaning and purpose of your life.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.