

So explain it to me: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

## **This Sunday's readings provide Bible backup for a nonscriptural word.**

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

It's been called a great hinge, this day of the Trinity. It stands between the two halves of the church year. The first half focuses on the life of Christ, the second half on the life of the church. While some call it a great hinge, others call it a great pain!

For those Christians who live their lives within the rhythm of the liturgical year, and for those preachers who are disciplined by the common lectionary, this is the only day of the year that calls us to ponder a teaching of the church rather than a teaching of Jesus. The scriptural readings for the day are carefully chosen to reflect the Three-in-One doctrine: God as Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. The scriptural readings provide Bible backup for a nonscriptural word: Trinity.

Although this mystery of God revealed in three ways is the core belief of Christianity, many struggle to explain it. Monotheistic Christians do backflips explaining why such a belief doesn't make them polytheists. Water has often been called forth as a witness. This common earthly element exists on this earth as a gas, a liquid and a solid. Three forms, one substance, get it?

At the age of three I had a memorable experience of the three-in-one. I was watching my grandmother sleep during her afternoon nap. As I contemplated her existence, I thought wisely, "That's Grandmamma, Mamma and Odelle." She smiled in her sleep as I called her by the names used for her by her grandchildren, her daughter and her husband. Three names, three relationships--and yet the same person. Amazing!

Within our Christian community these days, the doctrine of the Trinity is called many things besides amazing. Some call it archaic, obsolete or patriarchal. Some, believing that ancient confessional statements and doctrines no longer serve us, have abandoned trinitarian language for something less musty sounding.

Some have chosen a favorite member of the Trinity and have put all of their theological eggs into one basket. Some, concerned that the Trinity expressed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit portrays the Godhead as overly male, have worked to change the language. Some opt to ignore the Father-Son relationship and speak only of the functions of the three: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Others are outraged that Christians, especially Christian leaders, tinker so casually with the ancient language of the faith, the faith in which we baptize. No doubt the conversation and the debates will continue, and well they should.

Yet how important is it to explain the mystery of God revealed to us in three distinct ways? Mysteries explained cease to be mysteries, don't they? Perhaps the doctrine of the Trinity challenges our secret wish to know God fully and eliminate all mystery. This, after all, was the burning desire of our first parents in the Garden, a desire that ultimately caused them to fall from grace. Does this temptation to dispel all mystery still burn within us?

It seems to me that instead of explaining how three things are really one thing, we must try to do what the doctrine of the Trinity was originally formulated to do: give words to the faith. As Christians in mission, we must be ready to witness to others about what we believe and why we believe it. The early Christians, living in a hostile world, needed to put some definitive language to what they believed Christ had revealed to them. For the sake of unity they needed a common language, a common confession. In our hostile world, our witness demands the same thing.

To speak of the Trinity, the One God who is made known to us as the Creator of all, the redeeming Christ and the life-giving Spirit, is to use a shorthand way of expressing the depths of the faith. Without the Trinity holding us accountable, we might be tempted to worship a one-dimensional deity. This full view of God lifts up a God who is more than a Creator who made the world out of nothing, more than the God of the big-bang theory who began the universe and then left it to run on its own.

We do not worship a process, but a provider who continues to create and move among us. Each day is a new day, thanks to the Spirit of God in our midst. God's work in Jesus is the prime example of God's continuing creative and redeeming work among us and despite us. The Trinity gives language to our strongest belief that our God is not merely a God of history, performing mighty acts only in Bible times, but a powerful, on-the-move God of the present and of the future. That's what the Trinity wants us to understand in our heart of hearts.

How is this possible? We don't understand it, need not try and need not apologize for God's mysteries. What we do need to explain, in language articulate and faithful, is what God has done among us, what God is doing now and what God promises will be accomplished.

For many Christians, the language of the Trinity has been a useful unifying tool for such proclamation. We faithful must always have such a tool. We must be ready to make Jesus known, to articulate the faith to those who have not heard but who during those serendipitous moments in life approach us and ask: I understand you're a Christian. Can you explain it to me?