

**THE SERMONS OF JOHN WESLEY SERIES**

SERMON 2: ON THE TRINITY

*1 John 5:7*

*Preached on Sunday, May 7, 1775*

Wesley's original message can be found in  
*The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).

This version has been updated and edited by J. Thomas Johnson  
for a sermon preached on Sunday, June 12, 2022.

As I prepared to share Wesley's reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity today, I was reminded of a recent experience at my last ministry assignment. When I was pastoring Christ Community Church of the Nazarene in Camillus, in the middle of a sermon in which I mentioned the Trinity a visitor to the congregation stood up, interrupted the message, and reprimanded me publicly. He was of the opinion that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were three distinct beings—that is, three Gods. Their oneness, according to him, was a way of speaking of their agreement with one another, but not of their being, together, one God.

In response, I led the congregation to the Nazarene hymnal, and I read aloud the Nicene Creed (as we did this morning). For me, at that time, it was an open and shut case. Either one confesses belief in the Trinity or one is not Christian. The man was quite upset and ended up leaving the service before I had finished explaining the orthodox Christian view. It's one of those moments that has stayed with me. So, as I prepared this week to learn from John Wesley, I was anxious to hear what he had to say about the Trinity.

I've had to do a little editing of Wesley's teaching throughout the message just to keep his main point clear. Several of the illustrations Wesley used, though perfectly suitable in 1775, prove to be quite dated today. Having lived before Albert Einstein and his theory of relativity, for instance, Wesley's understanding of gravity and the motion of the planets was limited to that of his time. With that said, I think the points Wesley was attempting to make remain important. So, I have updated his illustrations with some that speak similarly today as his did to his original audience.

Also, the main passage Wesley was discussing in this sermon is 1 John 5:7. Interestingly, that verse occurs in a greatly abbreviated form in modern translations of the Bible. And the verse was debated heavily in Wesley's day, as well. Wesley seems to have believed that the longer version of 1 John 5:7 was authentic. Most scholars today believe the additional language was added later. In light of this, I have added a few verses to Wesley's message that help to support his point beyond 1 John 5:7.

With that said, our liturgist read Wesley's primary passage this morning from the NIV. I will begin Wesley's message by reading the same passage from the King James Version, which is the closest version to the one from which Wesley was preaching.

<sup>1</sup> Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. <sup>4</sup> For

whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, *even* our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? <sup>6</sup> This is he that came by water and blood, *even* Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. <sup>7</sup> ***For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.*** <sup>8</sup> And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one (1 John 5:1-8, KJV).

Whatever people may assume, opinion is not religion. Religion is not simply a way of speaking of a set of right opinions, nor is religion mentally agreeing with one or even with ten-thousand truths. Religion and opinion are worlds apart. Even a right opinion is as far from religion as the east is from the west. People can hold correct opinions about a great many things, and still, at the same time, be irreligious. And, on the other hand, people may be truly religious while, at the same time, holding many wrong opinions.

Can anyone possibly doubt this while Roman Catholicism remains in the world? For who can deny not only that throughout history many of this tradition have been truly religious—such as, Thomas à Kempis, Gregory Lopez, and the Marquis [Jean Baptiste] de Renty—, but also that many even today are real inward Christians? And yet, what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers! Even more, who can doubt this while there are Calvinists in the world—that is, those who believe in absolute predestination? Will anyone dare argue that none of these people are truly religious? Not only were many of them in the last century burning and shining lights, but many of them are still today real Christians, loving God and all humankind. And yet what are all the absurd opinions of the Roman Catholic Church compared to that one of the Calvinists that the God of love—the wise, just, merciful Father of the spirits of all flesh—has, from all eternity, fixed an absolute, unchangeable, irresistible decree that part of humankind will be saved and they have no say whatsoever in their salvation and that part of humankind will be condemned eternally and they have no say whatsoever in their damnation!

In light of this, we cannot but conclude that there are ten thousand mistakes which may coexist with real religion. Therefore, any careful and considerate person will allow for differing opinions. But there are some truths that are more important than others. It seems there are some which are of deep importance. I do not call them, myself, *fundamental* truths because that is an ambiguous word, and, consequently, there have been many heated disputes about the number of *fundamentals*. With that said, there are some truths which we must be concerned with knowing because of their close connection with vital religion. [In other words, there are some truths that are so central to the ways in which we worship God that to change them would be to change how the Scriptures require us to worship.] And certainly we might rank the words of 1 John 5:7 among these:

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one (1 John 5:7, KJV).

Now, I do not mean to say that we must believe this tradition or that tradition's explanation of these words. In my opinion, a wise person would not attempt to explain them at all. One of the best tracts which that great man, Dean [Jonathan] Swift, ever wrote was his Sermon upon the Trinity. In that sermon, Swift has demonstrated that all who have tried to explain the Trinity at all have utterly lost their way and done more theological harm than good.

[In the words of Jonathan Swift himself, from his sermon first printed in 1744:

Since the world abounds with troublesome books, particularly written against the doctrine of the Trinity, it is important to inform you that the authors of these books were mistaken from the beginning. Their desire was to demonstrate how impossible it is that three can be one and one can be three. However, the Scripture says no such thing, at least not in the way they have taken it. The Scriptures only say that there is some kind of unity and distinction in the divine nature, which humankind cannot possibly comprehend. Therefore, the whole doctrine is short and plain and should not be controversial. God has simply revealed the fact but concealed the manner. And therefore, many theologians who thought it best to refute those wicked books have been mistaken, too, by answering fools according to their folly and trying to explain a mystery, which God intended to keep secret from us. Therefore, I would encourage all people to avoid reading those wicked books written against the doctrine of the Trinity, and I would also encourage them to omit the responses to those books as unnecessary, as well (Swift, *A Sermon on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 1744, 11).]

Such folks have only, as Job has said, “darkened *the divine* plan by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2, NASB). It was in an evil hour that these expositors began their fruitless work.

I insist upon no explanation of the Trinity at all, not even the best one I ever saw—that is, that which is given to us in the creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius. [The Athanasian Creed begins with the words:

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;  
Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish  
everlastingly.

And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;  
Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance (*Historic Creeds and  
Confessions*, electronic ed. [Oak Harbor: Lexham Press, 1997]).

And so it continues.]

I would not say that those who cannot agree with the Athanasian Creed “will without doubt perish everlastingly.” Because of this statement and another later in the creed, I, for some time, did require that all believers subscribe to that creed. But then I realized, first, that these sentences relate only to willful unbelievers—that is, to those who have had opportunity to read and understand this creed, but who still reject it. And second, that they relate only to the substance of the doctrine of the Trinity, not to the philosophical illustrations of it.

I do not insist that anyone use the word *Trinity* or *Person* when speaking of God. I use these terms myself without any difficulty, because I know of no better words. But if anyone has a problem with them, who should force him or her to use them? Not I. I would not burn a man alive for saying, “Though I believe the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; yet I struggle with using the words *Trinity* and *Persons* because I do not find those terms in the Bible.” These are the words which the merciful John Calvin cited as having been written by Servetus. [Servetus was burned at the stake for heresy under

Calvin's leadership in the town of Geneva.] I would insist only on the words just as they appear in the Scriptural text without explanation:

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one (1 John 5:7, KJV).

"Just as they appear in the Scriptural text." But here arises a question: Is that text genuine? Were the words "...the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one..." originally written by the Apostle John, or were they inserted later by others? Many have questioned the authenticity of this passage, . . . .

[Whatever the outcome of the debate over the authenticity of 1 John 5:7, several other passages describe God as both Three and One. The insistence on the Oneness of God is from the beginning, as can be seen in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." And yet, Jesus revealed distinctions within the Oneness. For instance, in John 10:27-30, Jesus said:

<sup>27</sup> My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; <sup>28</sup> and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. <sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one (John 10:27-30, NASB).

Furthermore, in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus taught His disciples:

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. <sup>19</sup> Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20, NASB).

And the following exchange between the Apostle Philip and Jesus in John 14:8-11 is particularly telling:

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? The one who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own, but the Father, as He remains in Me, does His works. <sup>11</sup> Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves" (John 14:8-11, NASB).

We could go on, but that should suffice for our present purposes.]

Another objection has been made: "Whatever one makes of the text of 1 John 5:7, we cannot believe what we cannot understand. Therefore, when you require us to believe mysteries, we ask to be excused."

Here is a two-fold mistake: First, you are not required to believe any mystery with respect to the Trinity, despite your belief to the contrary. And second, every person already believes many things that s/he cannot understand.

To begin with the latter: Each of us already believes many things which we cannot fully comprehend. Each of us believes that there is a sun over our heads. . . . [and we believe that the earth revolves around the sun, along with the other planets, by a force called gravity. But, what precisely is gravity. When NASA was asked that question in its Starchild Question of the Month in February of 2001, the NASA response was:

We don't really know. We can define what it is as a field of influence, because we know how it operates in the universe. And some scientists think that it is made up of particles called gravitons which travel at the speed of light. However, if we are to be honest, we do not know what gravity "is" in any fundamental way - we only know how it behaves (<https://starchild.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/StarChild/questions/question30.html>).

But even though we cannot fully comprehend what gravity is, we still believe that the motion of the planets around the sun is effected by it.]

We believe there is such a thing as light, whether it emanates from the sun or any other light source, but we cannot fully comprehend either its nature or the manner in which it flows. . . . [Michael Schirbner, in his 2007 Live Science article entitled, "The Enduring Mystery of Light," has written:

It goes through walls, but slows to a standstill in ultra-cold gases. It carries electronic information for radios and TVs, but destroys genetic information in cells. It bends around buildings and squeezes through pinholes, but ricochets off tiny electrons.

It's light. And although we know it primarily as the opposite of darkness, most of light is not visible to our eyes. From low energy radio waves to high energy gamma rays, light zips around us, bounces off us, and sometimes goes through us.

Because it is so many things, defining light is a bit of a philosophical quandary. It doesn't help that light continue to surprise us, with novel materials that alter light's speed and trajectory in unexpected ways (<https://www.livescience.com/7186-enduring-mystery-light.html>).

Explain this, and I will explain the Three-One God.

. . . .

Many people believe we have souls. . . . [that] we have an immaterial soul connected with this physical body. But can any of us fully comprehend how? What are the ties that unite the heavenly flame with the earthly clod? None of us understands this. Those who believe this assume it to be true, but how it is, no one can explain.

. . . .

In summary, those who will not believe anything that they cannot fully comprehend, must not believe [in gravity], that there is light shining around them, nor that they have a soul. . . .

Secondly, as strange as it may seem, in requiring us to believe:

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one (1 John 5:7, KJV);

we are not required to believe any mystery. That great and good man, Dr. Peter Browne, the former bishop of Cork, has demonstrated that the Bible does not require us to believe any mystery at all. The Bible only requires us to believe facts, not the manner by which they have come to be facts. The mystery, after all, does not lie in the fact, but entirely in the manner.

For instance, “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3, NASB). I believe this. I believe the plain fact of it. There is no mystery at all in this. The mystery lies in the manner of it. How did it happen? How does creation work? I don’t know anything about the manner of it. I believe nothing about it. This is more an object of my faith than it is of my understanding.

To apply this to the Scripture passage before us:

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one (1 John 5:7, KJV).

I believe this fact also—namely, that God is Three and One. But I do not understand how this is so, and therefore, I do not believe in the manner of it—the how of it. It is in the manner of it that the mystery lies. But I am not concerned with how this is so. That is not the object of my faith. I believe only what God has revealed and no more. God has not revealed how this is so, therefore, I believe nothing about the manner of it. But still, it would be absurd of me to deny the fact that God is Three and One simply because I do not understand the manner of it. In other words, it would be absurd to reject what God *has* revealed simply because I do not fully comprehend what God *has not* revealed.

This is a significant point for us to grasp. There are many “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HUMAN HEART” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NASB). Some of these “to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:10, NASB)—“revealed;” that is, unveiled or uncovered. God revealed those parts He requires us to believe. But, parts of them God has not revealed. These things we need not and cannot believe. These unrevealed things are far above us, out of our sight.

Now, where is the wisdom of rejecting what is revealed because we do not understand what is not revealed? Is it wise to deny the fact of what God has unveiled because we cannot comprehend the manner of it, which remains hidden, especially when we consider that what God has revealed to us with respect to His being Three and One is a truth of the highest importance. This confession lies at the heart of Christianity, and, it lies at the root of all vital religion[—that is, at the heart of how the Scriptures instruct us to worship God.]

Unless these Three are One, how can “all honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:23, NASB). Socinus wrote in a letter to his friend, “I know not what to do with my untoward followers. They will not worship Jesus Christ. I tell them that it is written, ‘AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM’ (Hebrews 1:6, NASB). They answer, “However that be, if he is not God, we dare not worship him. For ‘It is written: YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY’ (Luke 4:8, NASB).

What I’m trying to explain is this: The knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven into all true Christian faith, and, therefore, with all vital religion[—that is, with all Christian worship.]

I am not arguing that every real Christian must confess with the Marquis de Renty, “I bear with me continually an experience of the truth of and an abundance of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity.” I presume that this is not the experience of “children,” but rather “fathers in Christ.”

But I do not know how anyone can be a Christian believer until he has, as the Apostle John has written, “the testimony in himself;” until “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16, NASB)—that is, until the Holy Spirit testifies that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son, and, having this testimony, he honors the Son and the blessed Spirit, even as he honors the Father.

It is not that every Christian testifies to this. Early in the Christian walk, perhaps one in twenty would not confess it. But, if you were to ask any true believer a few questions, you would find quite quickly that it is implied in what he or she believes.

Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion and deny that these Three are One. My hope for them is not that they will be saved, but that, before they pass into eternity, God will bring them “the knowledge of the truth” (Hebrews 10:26, NASB).