

# “The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

## Essential #2

God is the One who loves, the One who is Loved, and the Love between

John 14:7-18

*(Jesus said) "If you really knew me, you would know my Father aw well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."*

*Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."*

*Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.*

*"Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.*

*"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*

*If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

No wonder people think that Christians are crazy. Last week I appealed to you to take the leap of faith, to defy a reality that seems governed by perverse chance, and believe in a single God who is good, loving and in control. This week I ask you to take a further leap and believe that this single God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In asking you to believe in God, the one and only, my Christian faith had the company of Islam and Judaism, but in asking you to believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit my Christian faith seems to part company with every other religion.

I want you to know that the Christian faith was not arrived at through careful philosophical reasoning. Instead, Christian teaching struggled to explain the *experience* that the Church had had with God. This God, the One and Only, reserved the right to shape our conception of Him. It took the Church more than three hundred years to arrive at the beginning of an understanding of how God had come to us in Jesus Christ.

Consider Philip's request, which seems eminently reasonable, especially since Jesus himself brought up the subject: "Lord, show us the Father." When Jesus responds by saying, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," or (as in John 10:30) "I and the Father are one," his response can be misunderstood in two ways:

1. "The Father and I are a team. We are so unanimous in our opinions that listening to me is like listening to the Father. Although we are different entities, we work together all the time."
2. Or "The Father is merely another name for me. I am the Father, and although you see me as human, I actually hold the universe together at this moment."

But in the experience of the Church, Jesus and the Father didn't seem to be only teammates; their unity seems to go beyond that. Then again, when Jesus prays to his Father, it doesn't seem that He is merely talking to Himself. There seems to be a real conversation, a real relationship between Father and Son.

Here is my take on what Jesus means: "Although the Father and I are distinct to your **perception**, we are so united in thought, action and character that we are **one entity**, committed to acting for your good." When Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit later on, I take Him to mean this: "In fact, our unity and commitment are so strong, that when I am gone, I will send the Holy Spirit, also distinct to your **perception**, who will also be at one with my Father and Me."

I believe Jesus is saying that from our human perspective, we see three distinct persons, but could we have a heavenly perspective we would see the Unity of God. It's as though we were lines that had a single dimension (length) and we were looking at a triangle. We would see three distinct lines, but would have to take on faith the triangle's declaration that it is a single figure, not just three lines.

The church *experienced* God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, distinct yet one. How could the church explain this? The technical term that the Church came up with is *Trinity*—a single God who has acted towards us in three distinct roles. But the word "Trinity" is not itself biblical, it is not itself a word that God gave us by which to understand Him.

The Church attempted to illustrate or understand "One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" through the use of comparisons (three rays from a single sun, three shoots from a single tree, three faces of a single head), but all of these comparisons failed because ultimately God is not like a sun, or a tree, or a head.

The basic problem with trying to compare God to something is that almost *anything* you say about God is true—at least from a certain perspective. You can even say that God doesn't exist, and when you look at the matter from the point of view that no God constructed by the human imagination could exist, then you are right. It is as though God, who is beyond human comprehension, is like a wonderful cut diamond with an infinite number of facets. Any declaration might with some accuracy describe one or more of the facets, but what we want is the key that gives us some insight into all of them.

The key that the church found is the Biblical declaration that **God is love**. It is the single most important thing that the Bible teaches about God. Indeed, in Jesus Christ it turns out that although God is also good, and righteous, and in control, love is the central fact of God's being.

Follow the implications that the great thinkers of the church discovered. If love is the central fact of God's being, then God has always been love. God is love before the universe and time itself were created. If God is love, then God has always been love, and God has always been loving from before anything had been made for Him to love. Therefore, **God is the One who loves, the One who is loved, and the Love between the two.**

When you believe in a God who's PRIMARY quality is Love (rather than justice or power), that belief has dramatic implications

- This God must be both personal and relational (has an interest in persons and a personality to share)
- This God must delight in giving (consider the irrational extravagance of Jesus saying "anything you ask for in my name, I will give you")
- This God must seek ways to come close to others
- This God must want people who are like himself, freely able to offer and receive love.

This God is OUR lover, OUR beloved, and the very love that joins us to Him

Because God is the one who loves, the one who is love and the love between, we look to the past and see that God made us (the Father), redeemed us (the Son), and sustains us (the Holy Spirit). When we look to the future of God's love, we discover that God is at once our destination, our route to get there, and our mode of transportation.

I don't believe that the idea of Trinity (one God in three persons) makes strict philosophical or religious sense. Christians admit as much when they call this the central mystery of our faith. Others, who have tried to produce "improved" versions of Christianity have gotten rid of the Trinity (The Unitarians, some Pentecostals, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others).

These groups, however, never succeed in winning the vast majority of Christians. I think that is because we NEED this kind of God, and this is one case where our need is a truer indication of reality than our intellectual sense. I need a God who is at once the Lover (for I am unlovable), the Beloved (for I need a God who accommodates my limited humanity to enable me to love God), and the Love between us (because unless He gives an eternal love Himself, my capacity for loving will shipwreck on my own mortality). We need a Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and I invite you to choose to believe that the God we need is indeed the God who exists.

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