

Together, we are all children of God. We are brought into God's family, the body of Christ, by adoption. Our little piece of that family is here in this place; but we have a place in the worldwide community, by virtue of being led by the Spirit. Members of this community are not ranked. There is no hierarchy. Presbyterians are clear on that. Yes, we call forth many kinds of leaders—pastors, elders, deacons, and others. Those people have different functions, but they are never elevated to a new status; no one person submits to another; no particular group is subservient to another. We are all called to serve: to serve alongside one another as we all ultimately serve God.

The passage ends with a discussion of inheritance. As children of God, we are heirs of God, receiving God's gifts. In Jesus' time, the heir would have been a man who inherited authority, wealth, land and so forth in a family. Up to this point in Romans, Paul had been using a male-gendered term to refer to "children of God." But when he starts talking about inheritors, he changes that. From this point forward, he consistently uses a neuter word in Greek, which has no particular gender, to refer to those who inherit from God; a non-binary word, so to speak. The change is meaningful and intentional. Knisely explains, "By using this word, Paul signals that all God's children are entitled to God's inheritance without regard to gender. Together with Christ and without distinction among them, all God's children witness to God, inherit God's promise, suffer, and are glorified."⁸

It matters how we understand our Triune God. Because our perception of God shapes our treatment of one another and of ourselves. God's beautiful three-in-one community invites us to create and nurture and experience a community in which we are beloved and treated equally in love and honor; a community in which no one is subservient to another by virtue of their anatomy or pronouns or any other part of their identity. Our Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit-God lives in mutual relationship and invites us into the same kind of mutual dance with the people around us. As children of the Triune God, we all inherit the love and equity of those relationships and the gift of salvation, offered to all by the free gift of grace.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

- 1 "Full Text: Harrison Butker of Kansas City Chiefs Graduation Speech," May 16, 2024, *National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/harrison-butker-speech-at-benedictine>
- 2 See for example, Angela Yang, "Chiefs' Harrison Butker blasted for commencement speech encouraging women to be homemakers," May 15, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/harrison-butker-kansas-city-chiefs-backlash-benedictine-college-speech-rcna152433>
- 3 Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 191.
- 4 Barr, 193.
- 5 Owen Strachan, qtd. in Barr, 193.
- 6 Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order, F-1.01
- 7 Erica A. Knisely, "Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture, Romans 8:12-17" *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Vol 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 10.

May 26, 2024

Trinity Sunday

"Why the Doctrine of the Trinity Matters"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Romans 8:12-17

My preaching professor was clear: even on Trinity Sunday, no one wants to hear a sermon all about the doctrine of the Trinity. Well friends, right as that may be, I'm giving it a shot today, anyway. So stick with me. At first, it's not gonna feel like we're talking about the Triune God. But soon, we'll see just how important that doctrine actually is, to inform how we live our faith and build our relationships today.

Earlier this month, Harrison Butker, an NFL player for the Kansas City Chiefs delivered the commencement speech at Benedictine College in Kansas, a Catholic school. Butker's speech was controversial, to put it mildly, hitting on just about every divisive cultural issue of our time. In particular, he advised the women graduates, who, like all those listening in their caps and gowns, had just completed four years of rigorous study and training. He told the women they had been lied to about what they should want in life. Butker said, "How many of you [women] are sitting here now, about to cross this stage, and are thinking about all the promotions and titles you are going to get in your career? Some of you may go on to lead successful careers in the world. But I would venture to guess that the majority of you are most excited about your marriage and the children you will bring into this world."¹ He attributed his own success to his wife being a homemaker and rearing their children. And, what has been less reported on in the news, he said that, Lord willing, it was through their marriage that he and his wife would attain salvation.

Let's just be clear right now. Being a homemaker can be a blessing, just like any vocation can be, when it is a choice that you want to make and you are able to make it. Being a parent—a mom or dad—can also be a wonderful vocation for those who choose it, even as we remember that having kids is not always a possibility, even for those who want to do so. But that said, it was Butker's presumption in telling women their place; telling them what they should or should not want in life that has created a fire storm in the media.² And it is his religious views, in part, that have shaped his understanding.

A week or so before Butker gave his speech, I finished reading Beth Allison Barr's book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*. Barr is a church historian. For much of her life, she was a member of the Southern Baptist Church and her husband was

a youth pastor in that tradition. She has a PhD from the University of North Carolina. But in her Southern Baptist church, even as a professor, she was not allowed to teach the Bible, theology, or anything else, to boys or men. Because in that tradition's understanding of "Biblical womanhood," women are subordinate to men. That includes a prohibition on women teaching or preaching. And it especially means a focus on marriage, where wives are eternally subordinate to their husbands. The husband is to 'lead' and the wife is to 'submit.'

I should just parenthetically say, here, that these churches do not recognize same-sex marriages and are not affirming of LGBTQ folks. So to consider any other type of gender roles in marriage is simply a non-starter. And I'm not real sure what they teach about singleness, as it relates to being in charge of one's own household and life.

Barr writes in her book that she had heard literally hundreds of sermons about the importance of wives submitting to their husband's leadership, at weddings, of course, but also on Sunday mornings. Those teachings seem to push closer to what Butker said—that salvation is found not through the grace of Christ alone, as we believe; but must be earned through marriage, lived in that particular way. Eventually, Barr and her husband began questioning their church's views. They started to realize how this theology of gender roles simply mirrors patriarchy in the culture, rather than recognizing how the gospel, and Jesus Christ himself, actually challenge this kind of division at every turn. Barr's husband eventually lost his job for speaking out.

The kicker came at the end of her book, though. It was her church's teaching on the Triune God—the Trinity—that was the last straw. What she heard in church about the relationship among the three persons of God astounded her. Barr was sitting in a worship service listening to a sermon. She writes, "If I had been holding coffee, I would have dropped it that Sunday morning...seriously, I had just heard [the pastor] preach heresy. I am not using the word heresy lightly. Throughout church history, what I had just heard come from the mouth of our pastor had been declared heretical over and over and over again. Yet here was a twenty-first-century evangelical pastor boldly stating that Jesus is eternally subordinate to God the Father. This was a heresy so serious that the fourth-century church father Athanasius refused to recognize those who supported it as Christian."³

Now, I don't remember a lot of things from my church history classes. But I do remember the heresy Barr is talking about. It was taught by a fourth century priest named Arian. Did you catch what he said? Arian said that Jesus is of some different substance than God; Jesus is somehow quite different from his parent. In this thinking, God the Father gave instructions and Jesus obeyed them. But the implication, then, is that Jesus was not fully divine; not fully God in the same sense as the Creator. And if Jesus wasn't divine, that means his death and resurrection didn't bring about salvation after all. Yikes! This view is called 'eternal subordination of the Son.' Way back then, other church leaders condemned this idea and named it what it was: heresy. Creeds we still use today were written to

affirm the proper understanding of the Trinity; of Jesus as fully human *and* fully God. And yet, some one thousand, six hundred years later, this heresy is now being taught as truth in many American churches like the one Barr was sitting in that day.

But who cares, right? Does it matter to us what some other churches are teaching about the ins and outs of the Trinity? Well it turns out, it does matter. It matters because what we believe about God is a direct link to what we believe ourselves; about our relationships with each other and how those are formed more widely in our society. See the heresy about Jesus submitting to God is where the idea of wives submitting to their husbands originates; that's one of the ways that gender dynamic is justified. Barr writes that, in those churches, "because Jesus is eternally subordinate to God the Father, wives are eternally subordinate to their husbands."⁴ Southern Baptist leaders say that their understanding of the relationship between men and women is built "on a relationship of authority and submission in the nature of the Trinity."⁵

So what do we believe? What do we teach? We believe God is three persons in one: Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit; or Father, Son, and Spirit; take your pick. Each person or part of God is different. But importantly, they are all equal; no one of them submits to another. Each of their roles is of equal importance and meaning—Creating the world, Redeeming us, Sustaining us in faith. These three exist together in a co-equal relationship. My favorite image of the Triune God is that the three parts of the Trinity dance together as one, perhaps swirling in a circle, holding hands. And so God's own self is a small community—a community of three—in which all are honored the same in substance, and each role they play is crucial.

How we understand that community of God is directly related to how we understand *our* communities: the church, our families, our relationships. If we think one person of the Godhead is submissive to another, then I guess that justifies the notion that some people—namely women—have to be submissive in human relationships. But we don't believe that, thanks be to God. We stick with the historical, traditional, widely accepted doctrine of the Triune God. The very first sentence of the Book of Order, which is our Presbyterian guidebook for how to do church says, "The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules and transforms all things and all people...By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ."⁶ God is one, God is three, each aspect of God is God, fully. And that sense of mutuality in God sets us up for mutuality with one another.

The passage we read in Romans lifts up all the names for God and sufficiently mixes them all together to remind us that God is one and the same, even as we know God in different ways. But beyond the descriptions of God, the passage is also about the way we live together in community, too. Every time we see the word "you" in this passage, it's plural. Paul's words are, as commentator Erica A. Knisley writes, "a call to a way of living as a community made possible by the...Spirit of God. [The passage calls us to] reconsider the way we live our communal life."⁷