

## Introduction

$1+1+1=1$ . That's the math of the Trinity, which I preached about last week. God is one being with three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comprise a perfect community of unspeakably magnificent persons. That spectacular reality has profound implications to us, the most significant of which is the math of the church.  $1+1+1+1+1+1$  (and so on)=1, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## The Need for Community

Remember what I said last week. God expressed His triune nature in the universe. Well, the most noticeable expression of that nature is that human beings are inherently communal creatures. God is communal. He made us in His image. We, therefore, are communal well. The fact is we need vibrant and authentic relationships with others in order to thrive.

The most thorough research project on human relationships ever done, the Alameda County Study, tracked the lives of 7,000 people over a period of nine years. It found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than people with strong relational connections. It also found that people who had bad health habits but strong relational ties lived significantly longer than people who had excellent health habits but were isolated. Better to eat Hostess Cupcakes with friends, in other words, than broccoli alone.

Why is that? It's because God is communal and we, in His image, are too. It's "**in us**," in our psychological makeup, to have relationships that are meaningful and deep. We thrive when we do and languish when we don't. Aristotle said it well: "**But whoever is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.**" We need community, fellowship with others, because we're in the image of God who is triune.

That's our need and the term "**one another**" in verse 2 reveals the only way to meet it. The New Testament uses that term in 37 other

verses. In each, it refers to disciples of Jesus in community, the church. As I explained last week, those disciples are “**one**” as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are. Empowered and drawn together by the triune God who inhabits them, they relate to each other as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do. They are, as a result, a Trinitarian community. By “**Trinitarian community**,” I mean this. The three characteristics that define the community of God, which I explained last week, define the community of disciples as well. Let’s examine those characteristics.

## Equality

The first is equality.

In George Orwell’s acclaimed allegory, *Animal Farm*, a group of animals ousts the humans from a farm and begin running it themselves. But the society they form degenerates into a brutal tyranny of its own. This tyranny is expressed in a change in one of the seven commandments that were set up to justly govern the society, the 7th. At first it said, “**All animals are equal.**” But it was eventually changed to say, “**All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.**” Orwell was describing human nature. The changed 7th commandment is part of the belief system of almost everyone. They wouldn’t admit that but it is, either consciously or subconsciously. They believe and behave as if some people are more equal (valuable) than others are. They regard and treat some more favorably than they do others.

Here’s why. The seven billion people that inhabit earth are different in countless ways: talent, intelligence, resources, looks, gender, race, character, culture, personality, and beliefs, to name a few. The problem is that people routinely equate those conditions or traits with worth. They place on others the value they place on those conditions or traits. Valuing beauty, for instance, they treat the attractive more favorably than the unattractive. Valuing intelligence, they treat the smart more favorably than the not so smart. Valuing wealth, they treat the rich more favorably than the poor, and so on. They believe and behave as if some

people are **“more equal”** (valuable) than others are.

But disciples who comprise the church don't because they're in touch with reality. If God has any favorite words, **“one”** must be among them. He uses it seven times in verses 4-6. He identifies seven common bonds of disciples in doing so: one body (the church universal), one Spirit (the Holy Spirit), one hope (to be part of the eternal heavenly community), one Lord (Jesus), one faith (trust in Jesus), one baptism (by water), and one God and Father (all are children of God). Those common bonds of disciples supersede any differences they have. So, one disciple has an IQ of 120 and another 90 or one is a '10' on the beauty scale and another '4'. But both have the same Holy Spirit in them, for instance, (verse 4) or both are the children of God (verse 6), which supersedes their difference in IQ or appearance. No one in the church is objectively more or less valuable than anyone else is. Each is equally valuable.

Knowing that reality, disciples believe and behave as if it's so. Sally Farnum was a distinguished sculptress. One day, someone asked her little daughter which of her mother's children her mother loved the best. To which she replied: **“She loves Jimmy the best because he's the oldest. She loves Johnny the best because he's the youngest. And she loves me the best because I'm her only girl.”** Kids say the darndest things, and in this case, the profoundest as well.

That's how disciples who comprise the church believe and behave. They regard and treat no one in a lesser or better way. They regard and treat each one the best. That makes the church the only truly egalitarian community on earth. In belief and practice, there is equality for all.

### **In Deference**

A second characteristic defines the church as Trinitarian community. It's deference. Recall what I said last week. Deference always prevails in the community of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are **“other-centered”** in their relationship with each other. The concentrated focus and attention of each is on the other two. Each seeks the glory and

pleasure of the other two. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other that way, and so do disciples of Jesus.

Notice verse 1 in that regard. Paul exhorts us to **“walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.”** The honor of Jesus is at stake in how we treat each other in the church. We should, therefore, treat each other in a way that honors Him not dishonors Him. That’s the meaning of verse 1.

Paul explains what that way is in verse 2. He mentions four conditions. The first is **“humility,”** also translated **“lowliness.”** We treat others as more important than we are (Philippians 2:3). The second is **“gentleness.”** We’re self-controlled with others. The third is **“patience.”** We’re slow to retaliate and quick to forgive. And the fourth is **“tolerance.”** We put up with the flaws and mistakes of others.

Those four conditions flesh out what prevails in churches that are Trinitarian communities. It’s deference. Self-centeredness prevails in literally every earthly community, except one. That one is the church. Other-centeredness prevails there. The concentrated focus and attention of each disciple is on the others. Each seeks the glory and pleasure of the others over his or her own.

That’s deference and the four conditions in verse 2 only represent it not exhaust it. Deference plays itself out in other ways as well. In his book *Good Game*, Shirl Hoffman identifies four of those: **The Christian duty is to bestow honor on others, seek their advancement, recognize their superiority, and show esteem for their gifts.”** According to the Bible, there are still other ways. Rejoice when others outshine us. Grieve over their sins. Submit to their desires and needs. Behave becomingly in their presence. Be thick skinned when they speak and act. Listen to them more than speak to them, and more.

Disciples in community can be counted upon to act in those ways. They’re other-centered and defer to each other because they are.

## **Togetherness**

There's a third characteristic that defines the church as a Trinitarian community. It's togetherness. In verse 3, Paul exhorts us to be **"diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."** Last week, I talked about the togetherness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul's exhortation calls disciples to reproduce that togetherness in their churches. We answer that call by doing three things.

First, we insist on unity in the essentials or fundamentals of the faith. The essentials are the clear-cut propositions of Scripture. They're absolute truth and thus totally non-negotiable and beyond compromise. So, we don't budge, don't give an inch, when it comes to them. When it comes to them, we insist on unity. We insist that those in the church (local and universal) believe in and live by them. And we respond appropriately when they don't. We contend with them, or don't join them, or separate from them, or discipline them, or remove them from our midst, and so on as faithfulness to truth demands.

Embracing the teachings of a nationally known faith healer, an elder of a church came to believe and proclaim that God is one being with at least ten persons not three. The church's board confronted him, pointed out his error, and asked him to recant, but he wouldn't. So, it removed him as an elder, prompting him to leave the church. That God is one being with three persons is an essential. The church board, therefore, acted appropriately. We insist on unity in the essentials.

We reproduce God's togetherness by doing a second thing. We allow liberty in the non-essentials. Should parents give children cell phones? Should churches use sports to evangelize? Should workers be forced to join unions? The Bible doesn't explicitly or implicitly address those issues. They are, as a result, matters of preference, opinion, or taste not absolute truth. That makes them non-essentials and so, we allow liberty regarding them. We have the freedom to believe and do what we think is best. We allow others that same freedom.

We do a third thing to reproduce God's togetherness. We love in all things.

Most people take others disagreeing with them personally. They interpret them disagreeing to be inherent condemnations, get offended or mad because they do, and attack them. They quarrel with them, tongue lash them, say bad things about them to others, give them the cold shoulder, or physically assault them, and more.

But disciples don't. We desire and pursue the well-being and joy of those who disagree with us. We begin by seeking to understand two things, in detail. The first is what those who disagree with us believe. The second is why they believe it. We love people enough to understand what they believe and why. Love, when there's disagreement, begins there. It then continues by making our every contact with them one of good will and respect.

Several of you disagree with me about right to work laws. I'm not offended or mad that you think I'm wrong. On the contrary, I've asked you to explain particularly what you believe about that and why. We still disagree but I have nothing but goodwill and respect for you.

In the essentials – unity. In the non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love. That is how disciples reproduce the togetherness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their churches.

## **Conclusion**

Notice I said "**disciples.**" That implies a critical point in closing. Only disciples of Jesus can form a Trinitarian community. So let's become just that. Let's make and carry out the decision to arrange all of our affairs around being with Jesus in order to become like Him and to do all that He says. Then, empowered and directed by the triune God in our midst, let's devotedly pursue equality, deference, and togetherness with each other. The result, when we do, is what Jesus called being "**one**" as the Father, Holy Spirit, and He are (John 17:22). It's a Trinitarian community where love, joy, and peace prevail.  $1+1+1+1+1$  (and so on)=1. That is the math of the church, and it alone satisfies the deepest communal needs of human beings.