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Why We Believe What We Believe – Trinity Part 1

[Easley:] The way we understand the Trinitarian doctrine is not just academic; it's our salvation and redemption. It's our fellowship one with another and it's the way I have access to God; through the Trinitarian relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

[Lepine:] This is *inContext* with Michael Easley; I'm Bob Lepine. I heard somebody say once that we should not try and unscrew the inscrutable -

[Easley:] [Laughs]

[Lepine:] - but that's what you're going to dive into today as we continue through this series on "Why We Believe What We Believe." You're going to examine the doctrine of the Trinity. A lot of people look at this doctrine and say, "Well, this is just impossible for us to even comprehend therefore why even talk about it?"

[Easley:] Historically it is amazing the diverging opinions on the person and the work of the Trinity; the Holy Spirit. I find the Bible so consistent about when He's going to come, what He's going to do and how the Spirit plays into this. One of the insights for me, Bob, when I first did this study was how the Trinitarian doctrine is critical to our salvation. That was perhaps one of the neatest insights for me personally, reviewing the doctrine of the Trinity.

[Lepine:] Well, let's get right to it. This is part one of your message on the Trinity from the series "Why We Believe What We Believe."

[Easley:] Why we believe what we believe is not important; but why we believe what we believe is crucial. When you begin to think about theology and doctrine and systematic theology and Biblical theology, it's sort of a strange notion. If you look at the average Bible, this one perhaps that can fit in our hand, it's one volume, kinda small in all reality, and you weigh it against eight volumes of Schaeffer, twenty-two volumes of Owen. You know, just take any stack of systematic theology books and ask yourself, "What's wrong here?"

We have all these words and all these pages and all this, sort of verbosity to try to explain God. It's really quite comical if you think about it. You go to the library and look at the theological journals or the abstracts or the commentaries and look at the volumes that have been written and those that are coming out and those that will be written, all trying to explain one Book.

It's quite delightful in one respect; it's quite maddening in another. It never seems like you can get your arms around it. How can you explain God? And the study of Doctrine and Dogma and Theology is just that; it's trying to understand this collection, this corpus of material that teaches us what we would call a Biblical Theology. You might think of this as sort of theology in a vacuum.

"It's kind of boring, Michael. Why are we doing this?"

All your Theology professors love me; the rest of you are bored to tears, but why you believe what you believe is crucial in many ways. For example, if you're part of a local church, that church has a Statement of Faith or a Doctrinal Statement. If you join a

missions organization, they're going to have a Doctrinal Statement or a Statement of Faith. If you're part of a parachurch ministry, if you attend a local church or you align yourself with some group, they have a Doctrinal Statement; a Statement of Faith.

"This is what we believe, why we believe it and therefore our practice should follow from this."

Fifty years ago, perhaps, the issue was Liberalism. It had horns on it. It looked evil. It came out of the dark, German corners and it attacked the Bible. It attacked the notion of inerrancy. It attacked that that truth was God's Truth. It became Humanism run amuck and so what we would call Evangelical or Fundamental bowed up and re-wrote their doctrinal statements to clarify issues that were being attacked because theology is seldom hammered out in a vacuum; it's almost always forged in a fight.

So we think of our current context, a few years ago with a church that I served, we re-wrote our Statement of Faith. Now, we didn't change any doctrine but we took out some fun language where it talked about the Bible being "inerrant without admixture." Now I like the word admixture; I had an admixture on my neck once. [Laughter] They cut it off because it was bad. What's "admixture?"

So we cleaned up the language so that it communicated today without changing the basic theology of what we believed. But we added a paragraph and the paragraph we added into our doctrinal statement was a statement on the family, because we are in a context where the family is being attacked; by gender issues; by civil issues; by legal issues; by quality issues. We said, "You know, we have to write theology in a context and we better put it in a statement that this church believes this about the family because that's what God's Word teaches about the family."

So every context bears forth a statement. See what I'm getting at? The issues you are battling at today may seem sort of passé because those are the current issues; there'll be new ones in five, ten, fifteen, twenty years. There will always be new teachings fighting you so your Doctrinal Statement is what you come back to. Why we believe what we believe is crucial.

Today I want to think about the Trinity with you a little bit and one of the Professors here very wisely asked me, "Michael, do you think all the doctrines are the same in importance?"

I said, "Well, yes and no because in certain contexts some of those doctrines are going to mean more than they will in other contexts, right?"

We are not going to worry so much about certain issues that we do in different time spans, but when I first started laying the series out I said, "The Trinity? Ah, not that important."

Then I started studying it and I went, "Oh, it's very important."

We need to remind ourselves why we hold to a Trinitarian Godhead. What difference does it make in practical theology? What difference does it make in the way that I live as a believer in Christ? What difference does it make as I serve in a church? Some of you

know the names Phillips, Craig and Dean. Others know the name TD Jakes. Some may be aware of Gwen Shamblin who started Weigh Down workshops.

Those are just three fairly recent names that have come under great scrutiny for their view of the Doctrine of the Trinity and what they hold and teach and believe and whether that makes a difference or not in their music, and their teaching or in their books that they sell. So you have to scratch your head and ask, "Is this a line that I draw in the sand?" and say, "Because they are 'modalist' or because they are 'oneness' or 'Jesus only' that I no longer fellowship with them?"

The way you make that decision is through a Biblical theology of the Trinity. Modalism is simply that concept that looks at God as three modes; Father and Son and Spirit. We might say the old illustration of water; liquid, ice and steam or vapor. It's a very poor illustration because it reeks of modalities. One substance; three forms. Well, not really.

The "Jesus only" or the "oneness" movements, and there's lots of iterations of these, but largely attributed to the Pentecostal "oneness; Jesus only." So we are going to baptize someone. We're going to baptize them in "Jesus' name only." Do you draw a line of fellowship there? Do you say, "Oh, I can't play ball with you anymore because you hold to a belief I don't hold to?"

The way you weigh through these questions of course is a Biblical theology.

We have the extremes like Jehovah's Witness. Their Tract Society, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, they have printed a brochure called *Reconciliation* that says this:

"Never was there a more deceptive doctrine advance than that of the Trinity. It could have originated only in one mind and that the mind of Satan, the devil."

So the Watchtower is pretty clear about what they think of the Trinity. [Laughter]

"There's no warm, fuzzy, tolerant language here. It's of the devil."

The Universalist Church of America, Unitarians have all discounted the doctrine of the Trinity and we have, are we splitting theological hairs? Does it make a difference? In the Moody Doctrinal Statement one student proudly displayed the catalog as they came in, good for them. Article one reads:

"God is a person who has revealed Himself as a Trinity in unity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three persons and yet one God."

And then our statement has three verses I want to unpack briefly. Deuteronomy six verse four, the great Shema. You might turn in your Bible to Deuteronomy six verse four. Many of you have it memorized. Let's look at it again. Deuteronomy chapter six verse four:

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

In fact, read it with me.

[Congregation with Easley:] *"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"*

[Easley:] The Shema is the first word in the Hebrew text, "listen" or "hear." In some of the fragments, the targums, there's no capital and lowercase letters in Hebrew, but they make them very big. SHEMA. The idea is "LISTEN UP! PAY ATTENTION Israel!"

You know the context very well. The failure at Kadesh-Barnea, which was to be an eleven day journey, turns into a forty year wandering. The majority report of the spies won the day and the majority won and the majority will spend forty years dying in the wilderness. The land of Canaan was right in front of them and now they have to wait.

Now this cusp of the land, the very word of God to his very servant Moses, no one talked to God like Moses. He speaks to Israel and says, "Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one."

Now here are three observations about what I call a Confession of Faith; a Statement of Faith. Why is this important? Why do we make a lot out of this little phrase, "Listen O Israel!" Number one, it teaches Monotheism. He alone is God. Some translate the last word from the Hebrew there "one" in your English Bible as "unique" and that has some merit. The LORD your God is unique. But the idea of "one" harkens to a more systematic theology. The only begotten son, your God is one.

Why is it important to have a monotheistic God? I mean after all, can't God be tolerant of all the little idols? Can't God just get along with all the wannabes? Well number one, He is of course the only true God, but more importantly when they are going into a polytheistic culture rife with idolatry, rife with all the Canaanite sexualized gods and activities that are going to pull them away from the one true YAHWEH ELOHIM, He's trying to say, "Listen to Me. When you go into that land there are going to be many voices calling your heart away from Me, but you have one God. You have one God, not many."

Now if you study the Egyptian history or Greek mythology, you know that polytheism is really a lot of fun to study because seldom do they get along. In fact, a polytheistic culture is always in competition and in consort one with another to get their own agenda or to manipulate mankind and you're never quite sure if that God is going to be your friend or foe on a given day.

That was the case with the Canaanite rituals as well as Greek and Egyptian gods. They're capricious. They're self-serving. They can do stuff at their whim.

"Israel! Our God is one!"

What an easy application for you and me. All the things that pull our hearts, all the things that turn our heads, all the things that tug at our spiritual loins, all the things that cause us to doubt and to believe are nothing more and nothing less than little gods; little idols that are calling to you and promising you things they can never deliver. Believer in Jesus Christ, your God is one and He's good, and He's loving.

Secondly, He's personal. Note: Israel! Our God. Don't miss it. It's so obvious we miss it. Why is it important that He is our God? Why is it important that He's personal, He's available to us? He's not hiding at bay waiting for some whimsical sacrifice of a certain

number of fruits and vegetables and animal fat in a certain way and then He'll say, "Okay, now we can be friends."

He shows us the sacrificial system that shows us the breakdown between sin and holiness, but His goal is always to love His own, to care for His own, to protect His own, to give His own good things, to bring them into the Promised Land. He is our God. Why is that important? Because He created you, men and women, for fellowship. He did not create you to be subservient serfs who worked in a field and threw fruit into a fire. He made you to relate to you. He wants to be your Father. We have one God; He's our God.

Thirdly, He is "plural." Now stay with me for just a moment. I use the word plural with quotations; open and closed quotations around the word plural. The word ELOHIM, the IM ending is plural, generally speaking, in Hebrew. We say "GOIM" referring to the nations. Of course you know the word EL. Beth-EL, "the house of God" right? EL-OHIM, the IM ending indicates a plural nature.

Now some say, "Well that means because He's big and vast and large." Possibly. I think there's a telling hand here of a Trinitarian Godhead. He's one but He's many. He's one but He's three and we get the first tip of this. Now we can go back in time a little bit to Genesis one. In fact, turn there if you would. Genesis one verses twenty-six and twenty-seven and you'll see this plural language used in a different way but with the same point. You all know these verses. I'm not showing you anything new. This is a reminder. This is a refresher of why we believe what we believe about the Trinity. Look at Genesis one verses twenty-six and twenty-seven.

Then God said, "Let Us."

There it is; first person personal pronoun.

"Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness."

Who's He talking to? Is God schizophrenic here? Like the T-shirt that said, "I used to be schizophrenic but now we're okay." [Laughter]

No. There is a Trinitarian dialog going on at the beginning of time and creation.

"Let Us make man in Our image;" in the image of God.

By the way, man is the only image bearer. Animals do not bear God's image. Creation does not bear God's image in the same kind and way that man does. I've shared it with you before. I have a sanctified picture in my mind of Jesus Christ on His hand and knee with Adam, forming Adam, the perfect sandman if you will, ever made. And when He's finally finished with what would make Michelangelo's *David* look like child's play, He breathes life into it.

Jesus made a man in His image, the text says. Continue. Look at the verse again.

*"Let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."
God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

So we have the great Shema. The great Shema tells us at least three things. He is monotheistic; there is one God. Secondly, He's personal; He's *our* God. He wants a relationship with us. Thirdly, He's plural in the sense that there is a tip-of-the-hand of the Trinitarian doctrine; that God is the Son and the Spirit right from the beginning. That's the great Shema.

Now our Doctrinal Statement also uses the second passage, the Great Commission passage of Matthew chapter twenty-eight verse nineteen. Flip over there to your New Testament, to Matthew twenty-eight. Look again at a very familiar verse. Perhaps you've not looked at it in this way before. The first book of your New Testament. Matthew chapter twenty-eight verse nineteen. I want you to read with me. Whatever your version is, read it well.

[Congregation with Easley:] *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."*

[Easley:] We talk a lot about the Great Commission. We (tongue-in-cheek) talk about the Great Omission. I'm thrilled to be a part of the Moody Bible Institute that perhaps takes the Great Commission more seriously than any Bible college or seminary in the world. In God's great kindness we continue to learn that over seventy percent of our graduates are engaged in some kind of full-time Christian service/vocational ministry. That's why many of you are here.

I've interfaced with the missions agencies and they drool when they think of the Missions Week at Moody. [Laughter] They can't wait to come here and tempt you. [Laughter] In a Godly sort of way. I hear again and again as I travel around that Moody students are the *best*. I think that's due to God's great kindness. That certain men and women like you come here and say, "I want to serve Christ. I'm not sure what it means; the local church, overseas, TESL, here, there, flying a plane, in the Bush, in the cities. Not sure what it means, but I want to serve Christ."

That's the reputation that we enjoy. We don't deserve it. I think it's fair to say we are, in God's great kindness, holding pretty well to this Commission. Let's look at it for a moment. Now you all know the imperative verb is not "go." In many missions conferences "Go" is the first big, giant word on the banner during missions week and that's [pause] okay. [Laughter]

One of my former professors says he's going to write a book one day called *Misapplied Verses God Has Greatly Blessed*, so there you have it. [Laughter] The primary verbal force here is "make disciples" and you all know this. Some look at "go," "baptize" and "teach" as a participial forms that modify "make disciples."

"If that's true make disciples as you go and baptize and teach them."

Let's talk about making disciples for just a moment. We often compartmentalize evangelism and discipleship and there's some good discussion for that; good dialogue for that. I think and Jesus' mouth right now, it's one in the same. To make a disciple is to help someone come to faith in Christ and to become a follower of Jesus Christ. I think He says it's one in the same.

"Make a disciple. Make a follower of Mine."

And you do it with three things. You go; you have to take the message to them, you baptize them and you teach them. Baptism is, of course, a fascinating subject for a many part series whenever you talk about this, but let's look at it for just a moment here. The purpose we're thinking about is this Trinitarian doctrine with identification. There are three distinct persons mentioned in the passage. Look at the verse again.

"In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Here are some observations. There's unity and plurality here. The name, the word "name" is singular. It's the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So there's some unity and connection here. The Father, we often observe, sends the Son; the Son sends the Spirit and the Spirit indwells the believer in Jesus Christ to give him or her a relationship with the Son; with the Father. So we see this sort of complete Trinitarian doctrine unfolding.

[Lepine:] You know I can imagine that there are some who listen to this message and go, "Well this is all very interesting, but so what? I mean when it really comes down to it, whether I understand the orthodox view of the Trinity or whether I see it as water, steam, ice and liquid, does that really matter in my daily Christian living?"

[Easley:] I think it does in so far as we have such a great misunderstanding about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. If we understand the Trinitarian Doctrine, why did Christ send the Spirit? Why the Upper Room Discourse? Why does Christ go to such an extent to explain this *parakaleo*? So when you and I trusted Jesus, the Holy Spirit is our permanent roommate. He's the one who makes it possible for us to connect with Christ; to connect with the Father.

So yes, I think it's very important in understanding and growing in maturity to understand Scripture and how it applies to my life.

[Lepine:] Well, and fundamentally if we're going to have a relationship with someone, we're going to need to know that person. God has revealed Himself to us in Scripture as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to understand that as best we can and to believe what the Scripture reveals even when we can't fully understand it is what God has called us to in His Word.

We're trying to help folks understand these doctrines Michael, through a study we've put together called the "Why We Believe What We Believe Bible" study, where we combine your messages and your study notes, which we make available on MP3 CD, with the *Moody Handbook of Theology*. We put the two together so that folks can either go on their own study through these important doctrines of the Christian faith or they can use them to disciple someone else, use them in a church setting, a Sunday school class, or a class for new believers.

There's information about the *Why We Believe What We Believe Bible* study on our website: incontextradio.org. You can also get information when you call 1-877-3CONTEXT. 877-326-6839 and I think folks are going to find this to be a very helpful resource in re-grounding us in the fundamentals of the faith.

In fact, tomorrow, we're going to continue to look at why we believe what we believe about the Trinity. I hope listeners can be back with us for that on *inContext* with Michael Easley.