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## Discourse of Luther on the Holy Trinity

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## Discourse of Luther on the Holy Trinity

Translated by W. ARNDT

This discourse is taken from a two-volume collection of sermons of Luther which has the title: *Predigten D. Martin Luthers auf Grund von Nachschriften Georg Roerers und Anton Lauterbachs, bearbeitet von Georg Buchwald*. The volumes appeared in 1925 and 1926, respectively, in the publishing house of C. Bertelsmann, Guetersloh. In the fascinating introduction Dr. Buchwald, an eminent Luther scholar, points out that the sermons of Luther published in the old editions of the *Hauspostille* are unsatisfactory on account of the editing process to which they were subjected. As is well known, they were not written by Luther; the notes of people who heard him had to be relied on. These notes were expanded when they were published. Using the original notes of Roerer and Lauterbach for those sermons which they heard jointly, Dr. Buchwald has succeeded in submitting a number of discourses of the Reformer in a form which approximates the actual presentation more than that found in the postils commonly circulated. The years covered in these sermons are 1528—1532. The discourse here translated was preached June 4, 1531, and is printed in Volume II of the collection, pp. 352 ff. Luther apparently did not use a special text. It is evident that he had in mind as Scriptural basis chiefly the baptismal formula, Matt. 28:19, and John 5:21 and Rom. 8:11. That he uses the Creed as if it were a proof-text is due to his conviction that it represents the pure Apostolic doctrine.

This festival is called the Sunday of the Holy Trinity, and the Christian Church has ordained that it should annually be kept, impelled by strong necessity and urgent considerations, in order that this article of faith might be known and preserved. In it we state our belief that there is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This article is our chief teaching and is in keeping with our confession: I believe in God the Father, I believe in God the Son, I believe in God the Holy Spirit. If a single link is dropped, everything is lost.

In ancient times there was great trouble. In the days of Arius all who were considered holy and mighty had fallen



away from this doctrine; hardly two bishops were teaching correctly, all the others were adherents of Arius. For it is not difficult, and quite agreeable to our reason, to hold that there is only one God — which, of course, is true. But our reason cannot understand that there is one God and that you add He has the Son and the Holy Spirit. It desires to make three gods out of one. This teaching our reason can grasp at once. But the teaching of the Trinity it cannot tolerate. Hence Jews and Turks become defiant and say that there are not more disgusting people on earth than the Christians, since they preach one God and yet adore three. No, they say, these things do not make sense, three hosts in one house, two cocks on one dunghill.<sup>1</sup> They have become obdurate. And though some Jews have been “converted” and have acted as though they desired to become Christians, they have retained their opinion.

Hence this festival has been ordained by the Church with the intention that we should treat this article of faith today, in order that it may remain a possession of Christians. Otherwise it could easily come about that we through false prophets should be seduced to accept the creed of the Turks. This situation indeed will again arise. If Satan will not render us helpless through the Pope or the sword, he will see to it that shameless, evil preachers are brought in who will oppose this very article, in fact, there are such people about even now. Formerly, as long as the Word was suppressed, he did not interfere with the preaching of this truth; but now he is filled with rage. If he cannot butcher and murder, he will devastate our religion by means of heresy. But, God granting His grace, this divine truth will remain in possession of the field and be victorious, as in the Book of Revelation the Lamb is described [Rev. 17:14], which has again conquered.

In the first place, it is supremely necessary to lock up our reason and not to treat this doctrine in its fashion. For the heretics have tried to fathom this teaching as to whether it could be true. Thus the devil places the Word of God before a person and asks: How does it agree? In this manner he acted toward Eve when he said [Gen. 3:1], “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbial sayings.



At first she was not worried about the Word. But then the devil opens her eyes and asks, Why should God have forbidden you to eat of this tree? So she began to ponder this matter and to discuss it with the devil. He helped (!) her at once, but it was as wholesome for her as for a dog to eat grass;<sup>2</sup> hence I say again, this is not a matter for debate: the article is not to be considered [philosophically]. For in this doctrine nothing is to be heard and spoken except the Word of God. We simply have to learn how God speaks of it. Hilary says correctly, "Who can better speak of God than God Himself?" For He knows best what He is and what He is not. Should anybody wish to speak better of Him, he will speak either more obscurely or worse, with the result that people will understand the teaching all the less. Certainly, there is no man on earth who knows what God is, considered in His essence. Hence we simply have to hear Him and speak with His words. But if you insist on knowing how this teaching can be self-consistent and true, then you share the fate of Eve and of all heretics. The slogan must be: Let reason be silent, and let us simply get our ears ready to hear what God says.

When the learned men debate with the heretics, they must read the Gospel according to John and the Letters of Paul, which say that there is only one God, but that God nevertheless is such a Being that the Father has a Son who is true God with Him, that is, who is in Him. Here there is no separation as between God and His creatures, but God is truly in Him. We are taught the divine essence has this form: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, and there is no God but this one, the God of three Persons, undivided and of the same essence, yes, undivided, though it must be said that there are three distinct Persons and that they have one and the same name and activity. John 5 [v. 21] Christ says: "For as the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will." These words powerfully prove that the Son is God; for to Him belongs the function of raising the dead. The Jews understood this to mean that He made Himself equal with God. Hence they wished to stone Him. To have life in one's self is the characteristic of one who is God. In this way the Spirit, too, raises the

<sup>2</sup> Another proverbial saying.



dead, as St. Paul says [Rom. 8:11]: "If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you." Satan is able to kill, but to make alive and to create is not in the power of the devils, the angels, or any other creature.

The learned, of course, will find many passages in the Scriptures where the names and works of the Persons of the Trinity are undivided and not separated. But to look into the divine majesty—there we must listen to what God Himself says and not to what the enthusiasts say. So that is my precept for the learned whose task is to defend the Scripture teaching. As for you laymen, those of you that are able to understand it, do you, too, learn this teaching from the Scriptures. But a simple Christian may be satisfied with saying, I believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With the same faith with which you believe in the Father, you believe in the Son; and with the same faith with which you believe in the Son, you believe in the Holy Spirit.

Let this be your armor; it is the most simple and the strongest possible, and nobody's talk will avail against it. For the text here says powerfully that you believe in the Son in the same way as in the Father.<sup>3</sup> And yet our faith is to be directed to nobody but God, for the Holy Scripture says that we are not to believe in man, especially dare you not put your trust in man for the obtaining of eternal life. For eternal life and forgiveness of sins you are to have only if you believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This faith gives you everything contained in the Creed. But if the Son and the Holy Spirit were not God, you would not have these things. But now, because these things are given you through all three, they are God. And since you in and with the same faith adore Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there has to be one faith, one eternal life, one Baptism. There is but one God, because the honor of granting you forgiveness of sins and raising you from the dead can be granted no one but the true God. For neither an angel nor the devil will give these blessings, nor is it written that you should expect these things from them; the Creed ascribes these matters to God alone.

<sup>3</sup> Luther evidently here is harking back to his reference to John 5:21. He probably had quoted the following verses, too.



This has been the unanimous confession of the Church for more than 1,500 years, and though the Creed has been obscured by the Pope, the words have remained on account of those who have remained in the true faith. Since, then, this teaching has long remained in the Christian Church and has not been cast away, you here have the proof of its being true. Arius attacked it with all kings, emperors, and princes. These potentates are dead and gone, but the article of faith which was buffeted and wounded has remained and will remain. Hence let this be your foundation: I believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the sake of eternal life, the resurrection of the body, and the forgiveness of sin; I expect these things from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thus God speaks of Himself. Holding this, you can face the foe. This has been the confession of all Christendom for these many centuries, in spite of the numerous enemies attacking it with all rulers and wise men. Yes, a big stack of heretics!

In the second place, turn to Holy Baptism. From God, who is called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we receive forgiveness of sins. You observe that all children are baptized in this fashion: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." That is the common way in the whole Christian communion and has remained and been preserved, so that all have been baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is my Baptism, which has been performed not only in the name of the Father, or of the Father and of the Son, but of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, since that is the divine command. It is only one God, one Creator, Lord, and King, and still in the one essence and under the one name there are three distinct Persons. If the Son and the Holy Spirit were not God, then God would be blasphemed and disgraced because His name and work would be given to somebody else; there are the words written in the book of Isaiah [42:8], "I am the Lord; that is My name; and My glory will I not give to another." But both these matters, name and honor, He gives to the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Hence I conclude: Either Christendom must have erred, or these three Persons are the one God; the Father gives life in Baptism, likewise the Son, likewise the Holy Spirit. So here you have two good arguments against the devil: "I won't

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debate this doctrine with you; you insist that I should consider the Gospel and the Word of God on the basis of human reason; I simply say, I am baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this is my faith which I confess: I believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this faith do I obtain forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. For this nobody can do but God; though it is accomplished through Baptism and preaching, yet it is He who does it." To overcome the devil and to bestow eternal life are divine works. For He who bestows these things is God. Now, it is you who bestow it, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Do not debate about it, but cling to the Word. We have two strong witnesses: first, the Creed; next, Holy Baptism. Let this suffice on the subject.

