

Trinity – love that never ends

#3 Trinity and Equality

Way back in 1993, when we used to go to the movies, Bill Murray played a cynical and depressed TV news presenter named Phil who was locked in 24-hour repeat in Punxsutawney Pennsylvania.¹



Have you felt like each day is on repeat during some periods of these Covid-19 restrictions? When the alarm clock goes off each morning have you really begun a new day? Has anything really changed in the world? In **politics**?



In workplace **inequalities**? In the struggles of the **poor**? In global **inequities**? In the Church?

You see, all the talk on TV is about getting **back to normal**. Yet, I wonder if **pre-covid “normal” is really all it’s cracked up to be?** I want to encourage you to take this unwanted opportunity to consider the **changes we can make** to contribute to a better representation of the Gospel to the world.

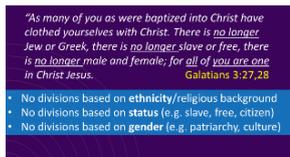
Today in our series on the *Trinity – Love that never ends*, I’ll connect the dots between **knowing God** as Triune and **treating other people with equal dignity and equal opportunity** – Trinity and Equality



3 indicators of church health

In our reading from **Galatians chapter 3** today, the Apostle Paul points to **3 indicators** of **church health** and maturity. When you come to know God through the cross of Christ, Paul says to the Galatians², a **revolutionary kind of community** is possible. Paul writes...

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is **no longer Jew or Greek**, there is **no longer slave or free**, there



¹ Other more contemporary films use a time-loop (e.g. Edge of Tomorrow), but the change of heart to a stubborn man by way of love in Groundhog Day was just too relevant to this sermon to ignore 😊

² See Galatians 4:1-11

is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:27,28)

1st Century life in Palestine was rife with **divisions** and oppressive **subordination**. Ingrained attitudes of **inferiority** led to hostilities both **social and political**.³ Many of these were initially found in the hearts of new Christians in the early church.

Here in Galatians 3, Paul describes an ideal, Gospel-shaped church community:

1. No divisions based on **ethnicity**/culture/religion
2. No divisions based on **status** (whether slave, free, or citizen of Rome)
3. No divisions based on **gender** (i.e. against patriarchy, former religious and secular and State definitions)

Paul also wrote in Ephesians 2 how Christ **brought down walls of hostility** through his death on the cross, making one **new humanity of peace**.⁴

Scott Harrower in his book *God of All Comfort*, says, “The opposite of the horrors we see on earth is ‘shalom’ (or the peace of God).”⁵



People in Paul’s time longed for a life where **equal dignity, equal opportunity** and **equal freedoms** were possible.

Imagine how **attractive** some of the early churches were to those discovered a community **lacking the normal divisions** found in society – a **Gospel-shaped community!**

Some people wrote about these surprising congregations...

- For example, in 110AD a roman governor known as **Pliny the Younger**, suspicious of churches, interrogated Christians, and was surprised to meet two former slave girls who had become “**deaconess**” in the church.

³ Classism gave Rome order, with slaves, freemen, and citizens as a basic set of tiers. Jews were marginalized, and hated Rome and avoided any contact with ‘Gentiles’. Women and children little or no status at all. Within Judaism of the day, women and children fared just as poorly, e.g., a Jewish Mishnah stated “He who speaks with a woman draws down misfortune on himself, neglects the words of the law, and finally earns hell.” In the early church, hostilities between Jews and Gentiles were hard to overcome (e.g. see Ephesians chapter 2).

⁴ ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

⁵ p.20

- In 130AD a writer named **Diognetes** noted the peaceful **multi-ethnic make-up** of churches and praised their “wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.”
- In the late 2nd Century, **Tertullian** famously said how onlookers say of churches, “Look . . . how they **love one another**”

Well, that was Paul’s world. But what of ours? Do people today long for a world lacking hostility and division and subordination? **You know they do!**

- Think of the **Rohingya minority** in Myanmar, and **ethnic** and religious divisions today, with a Government forcing them into isolation at huge risk of annihilation.
- **A new and frightening division based on status** has emerged in **El Salvador** as the 38 year old president has incarcerated **all who test positive to COVID-19** and deemed them unworthy of dignity, protection, healthcare or any basic human rights.
- **In our own country, thinking of gender,** Google searches of **domestic violence against women** were up by 75%⁶ in lockdown, and 1 in 4 Australian women before the pandemic experienced **physical violence** since the age of 15 before.⁷



We too, in the 21st Century, **long for a life** where people are offered **equal dignity** and **equal value** and a community that promotes **peace** and freedom!

In my travels I worked for a day with a young Pakistani aid worker. **Her name was Celestina.** She said to me,

“Steve, in my country, the worst situation you can be in is to be a **child**, to be **female**, to be a **non-Muslim**, and to be **disabled.**”

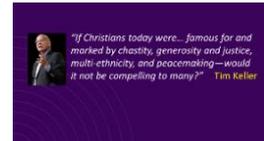
Celestina, a Christian, served every day among people who **fit all 4 categories.**

Tim Keller asks astutely,

⁶ NSW in March

⁷ Also, Annabel Crabb wrote today about the lack of change in shared household management under lockdown and The ABC reports how women who are casual workers on temp visas are at huge risk right now

“If Christians today were... famous for and marked by chastity, generosity and justice, multi-ethnicity, and peacemaking—would it not be **compelling to many?**”⁸



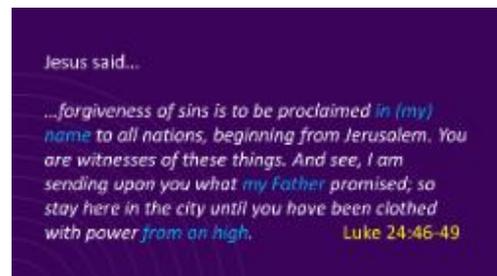
Too often we like to divide and conquer on the basis of **status**,

...yet Jesus **met with the untouchables, loved the unlovable**, such that Luke and Matthew call him “friend of outsiders” (Lk 7:34, Matt 11:19)

Too often we like to define **roles** and **responsibilities** of **women** in favour of the **status of men**,

...yet Jesus broke through the relationship roles and rules of his day. He offered **equal dignity, equal opportunity** and **equal communion with God** for men *and* women through faith (Acts 2:17, Eph. 4:13).

Jesus of Nazareth introduced us to **the inner life of God**. In the Trinity, there is a **loving relationship** between Father, Son and Holy Spirit of equal dignity and purpose, equal in **being, power and eternity**, and where **there is no division and no subordination**.



In **Luke 24** where Jesus commissioned his male and female disciples, we get another glimpse into the loving unity of the Triune God⁹.

This is the God, Paul says in **Colossians 3:10-11**, in whose image we are **being re-made**. And it's because of that **inner life of God**, where love reigns and there is unity and harmony, that a **revolutionary community** is possible among us. Paul writes:



(Your new self) is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer (divisions based on ethnicity, religious background, status), Christ is all and in all!

Aimee Byrd says, “The Gospel is about ‘making common’ the hope of communion with God and with one another”¹⁰



⁸ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-we-need-to-learn-from-early-church/>

⁹ Theologians may call this a proto-trinitarian text

¹⁰ MasterLectures by Zondervan

In the Gospel of Jesus **the promise to people of equal dignity, equal value, harmony and peace** in relationships comes to us because that's **the inner life of the Living God**. Jesus' death on the cross deals with sin that divides and makes way for a new humanity emerge.¹¹

How wonderful would it be today if the gossip around town about Christian churches was about its lack of divisions and equal dignity for its people!

Conclusion

In the film Groundhog Day, you'll remember, it wasn't until the heart of Bill Murray's character was transformed by love (in his case, romantic love) that the clock flipped forward to a new day.



Let's be sure that our lives are not on **24-hour repeat** now. Let's examine our hearts and re-assess our lives in the light of God. What **must** change, especially in the Church, for us to play our part in reflecting the **liberty, equal dignity and equal opportunity** the Gospel of Jesus offers the world?

Paul's **three indicators of Gospel-shaped community** (no divisions due to ethnicity or background, no divisions due to gender, or status) give us practical targets for demolishing the **"walls"** that subordinate and suppress.



1. **Race** – Regarding ethnic divisions, we should re-assess how welcoming we really are to all people as a Church. **Racial tensions** are on the rise worldwide, partly due to the political rhetoric of national leaders.
2. **Gender** – We must assure women of their equal dignity and equal opportunity in the Church. In the Australian Church we continue to see church leaders borrowing leaning on attitudes best-suited to the Victorian era or the 1950's. Worse still, we see young male clergy basing their teaching on best-selling American theologians like Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem who hold to an alternative view of the Holy Trinity and insist that women give glory to God best when they **serve the needs of men**.¹² St Michaels has a long history of egalitarian practice in ministry

¹¹ See Ephesians 2

¹² The most common being doctrines referred to as the "eternal subordination of the Son" and "functional subordination of the Son"

and let's be sure we continue, and base our practice on our understanding of the Gospel, welcoming women to all levels of ministry.

3. **Status** – Thirdly, regarding status, it's predicted that in 2021 there will be **60 million people in poverty** worldwide. At home in Australia, the future includes long virtual queues for unemployment benefits too, and we must insure that people are not treated with labels like **“the unemployed”** in the Church as they are by the Federal Government.

In the first sermon of this series I borrowed an acronym from Mike Bird to help us summarize key beliefs about the Trinity. One of those, **N for no subordination**, is a point of doctrine under threat in our time. Often in history, distortions of orthodox views on the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit in carried with them significant distortions in relationships and roles in the Church.

Let's renew today our awareness of the appeal in Scripture to the unity, equality, and mutual love and purpose in God and in the Church.

Let's pray that God may help us to break the viscous cycle of divisions that continue to be set on 24-hour repeat, at least in the Church, so that prejudices, injustices and inequities might give way to unity, harmony and peace.

Let's seek through our faith in Jesus Christ to better reflect the unity, equality and harmony of the inner life of God the Trinity.