

Exploring The Trinity

Introduction

Today, we will be looking at the doctrine of the Trinity – one of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. It is not my aim to explain every nuance or leave you with all of your questions answered, since the Trinity is a mystery far above our understanding and ability to work out. Many smarter people than myself have attempted to tie up all the loose ends and apparent contradictions, and ended up running into weird and wonderful errors and heresy as a result of refusing to live with the sense of worshipful mystery that the Trinity requires of us. Studying the Trinity involves the use of some words that are a little bit technical, which I will try to explain as we go along. If there are any that I forget to explain, please don't hold it against me as you look them up in a dictionary!

The question could reasonably be asked, “Since the Trinity is so beyond our understanding and confuses so many people, why bother looking at it? Let's just accept it and move on to messages about how God wants us to live.” I believe it is vital to look at and attempt to understand the Trinity better, for the following reasons:

1. The Trinity is a foundational doctrine, which affects every part of the Christian faith – from our understanding of the atonement, our experience in conversion, and how we should pray and worship God rightly.
2. Without a right foundation it's sometimes impossible to even ask the right question, let alone come up with the right answer.
3. Above all else, the Trinity is about God as He really is. It isn't about the nature of God (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence) or the character of God (holiness, gracious, loving, righteous). It is about the ontology of God – the very nature and make-up of God's existence.

This message won't have a set of action points at the end that detail how we should live our lives differently after understanding more of the Trinity. Rather, the main application point is that we need to understand more, because it is important that we know the God we worship and serve.

The word “Trinity” does not appear in our Bibles, but that does not mean that it is not biblical! This is like some of the jargon we modern-day charismatics have crafted to summarise biblical teaching. For example, can you give me the chapter and verse that talks about “Divine appointments”? Neither can I, but I can point you to Acts 8, where the Lord supernaturally leads the evangelist Philip to a meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch. Or to the book of Esther which is one long catalogue of God manoeuvring His people into the right place at the right time. Divine appointment is simply a short-hand term we have crafted to summarise this teaching. In the same way, the Trinity is a word coined to summarise the truth concerning God contained in the Bible.

The doctrine of the Trinity was developed and refined by the early church in response to various disagreements and heresies that occurred. These heresies led to the formation and standardisation of doctrine and terminology, primarily in the form of various creeds and statements of faith. Tertullian (AD 155 – 210) is the first person to actually use the term, with other notable defenders of the doctrine including Athanasius and Augustine. It was summarised in a standard form in the Nicene Creed (available at the end of these notes), which has remained the standard orthodox statement of belief in the Trinity

Defining the Trinity

The Trinity is a short-hand term we use to describe three truths about God:

1. There is one God
2. This one God has always and will always exist in the form of three “persons” - Father, Son and Holy Spirit
3. Each “person” is fully and equally God

The term “person” here is used in a very specific sense. We tend to hear the word “person” and immediately think of a human being like us. We are using it here to refer to the fact that each member of the Trinity thinks, feels, acts, speaks and relates to others. This makes them more like a group of persons rather than a collection of impersonal forces.

In describing each person as fully God, we simply mean that each member of the Trinity fully

shares in the divine attributes e.g. omniscience (God is all-knowing), omnipresence (God is present everywhere), omnipotence (God is all-powerful) and eternity (God has always and will always exist). So the Father is omniscient, and so if the Son and the Spirit, and so on.

Let's take each statement and see what the Bible has to say about them.

There is only one God

This is the most common belief about God, across most of the major religions and Christian-based cults in the world. It is affirmed by Christians of all persuasions, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians, Sikhism, and the Bahá'í Faith. It is most important to us that is repeatedly affirmed through the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments.

- **Deuteronomy 6:4** – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

This is the central creed of modern-day Judaism, repeated daily by Jews all-over the world as a confession of faith in one God. We can use it too without crossing our fingers, as orthodox belief in the Trinity requires belief in only one God.

- **Deuteronomy 32:39** – “See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no God beside me...”
- **Isaiah 45:5-6** – “I am the LORD, and there is no other besides me there is no God...”
- Jesus only ever taught us about one true God, even while claiming to be equal to Him.
- **1 Timothy 2:5** – “For there is one God...”
- **James 2:19** – “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!”

If we affirm that there is one God, we're at least on the same page as the demons. Which is good as I'd be worried if demons knew more about God than the church!

This is just a sampling of verses that demonstrate that the Bible teaches there is only one God. But it teaches other things that slightly complicate this simple understanding...

There are three “persons” in God

Old Testament hints at plurality in God

- **Genesis 1:1** – The word translated as “God” is the Hebrew word “elohim”, which is a plural noun hinting at a group of beings that are united rather than a simple single entity. The more interesting thing is that this plural noun is coupled with the singular form of the verb “create”. While the English translation doesn't really help us understand this nuance¹, what we have here is a hint of a being that is both plural and singular – a nice early hint at the possibility of the Trinity.
- **Genesis 1:26-27** – Let “us” make man in “our” image. As a child, I once read this and thought that God was speaking to angels. The only trouble with this is that we aren't made in the image of angels, so it can't mean this. Others suggest that God is using the plural of majesty a bit like Queen Victoria used to (“We are not amused”). Except that there is no record of any king from that culture or time period using such language, so it can't be this. Rather, this is another hint at a plurality within God – God is talking to someone else who is also God.
- **Deuteronomy 6:4** – The very same passage used by modern day Jews to affirm belief in one true God also contains a couple of hints of the Trinity. First, the word “God” is again “elohim” in the Hebrew. The second hint is the word translated as “one” which is “echad” in the Hebrew. This is the word used to describe a compound unity e.g. “echad” bunch of grapes. A literal translation of Deuteronomy 6:4 would be something along the lines of “Hear O Israel: The LORD our gods, the LORD is one” - again, a hint at a plurality within one God.
Echad is also used in Genesis 2:24 about the union between man and wife (“one (echad) flesh”) and in Genesis 11:6 about the people building the tower at Babel (“one (echad) people”).
- **Psalms 45:6-7** – In this passage, the psalmist starts out talking to someone identified as God.

1. Since we don't often have different forms of verbs for actions carried out by a single person and by groups of people.

Yet in verse 7, still talking to “God”, the psalmist talks about what “God, your God” will do for God. This is used in Hebrews to talk about the supremacy of Jesus, and is a great early hint in the Old Testament.

- **The angel of the LORD** – in several places in the Old Testament, we meet the angel of the LORD (not “an” angel, but “the” angel of the LORD). This being is both distinct from God and yet identified with God as can be seen in a careful reading of Exodus 3:2-6 or Judges 6:11-14.
- **Isaiah 6:1-3** – This is a bit more subtle, but looking back from the New Testament, it is hard to not see the angels worship of the God who is “Holy, holy, holy” as an early hint at the Trinity.

Teaching about the three persons in the New Testament

Plurality within God

- **1 John 4:8** – Here John is talking about God, and makes the statement that “God is love”. This is something that could not be said of a God who was one in a simple way as, for example, Muslims believe. Muslims could agree with the idea that God is loving, but could not say God is love, since a single entity cannot love. It is only Christians holding to a belief in the Trinity who are able to affirm this since the Trinity puts forward a picture of persons within God living in loving fellowship with each other – a God who can be said to be love itself.

The Father is God

No-one really denies that the Father is God. In fact, most people immediately think of the Father when they hear the word “God” and assume that the Father is obvious all the way through the Bible, whereas the Son and the Holy Spirit were either playing hide-and-seek in the Old Testament or just waiting in the wings for their chance to shine.

The New Testament affirms that the Father is God pretty much everywhere – not least in Jesus' teaching about the Father who sent Him in John's gospel.

The Son is God

We looked at this in more detail a few weeks ago, but as a brief refresher we have Jesus claiming to be God in John 8 when He said “Before Abraham was, I AM” - using the divine name Yahweh to identify Himself.

His followers recognised His identity as God in

- **John 1:1** – “In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and *the Word was God.*”
- **Philippians 2:5-11** – Jesus was, in very nature, God...
- **Colossians 1:15-20** – Jesus is the image of the invisible God...
- **John 20:28** – Where “Doubting Thomas” became the first person to declare Jesus, without equivocation or watering it down, “My Lord and my God”
- **Romans 9:5** – “...Christ who is God over all”
- **Titus 2:13** – “...the appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ”

As mentioned a few weeks ago, it is the deity of the Son which is the most contested tenet of Trinitarian doctrine. The first major controversy was started by Arius of Alexandria who taught that, while Jesus was divine, He was actually a created being rather than eternally existent as the Son within the Trinity. Modern day Arians include Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians who both affirm Jesus as special, but refuse to ascribe to Him the full status of God.

The Holy Spirit is God

The most common mistake regarding the Holy Spirit isn't disbelieving His equality with God, but believing He is a “He” at all! Hearing people refer to the Holy Spirit as an “it” rather than a “he” is one of the things that gets my heresy-hunting hackles up more than most other things!

According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30), resisted (Acts 7:51) and insulted (Hebrews 10:29). Jesus taught us about the unforgivable sin, which is

blaspheming the Holy Spirit – how do you blaspheme an impersonal force or concept? In John 14-16, Jesus presents His teaching about the Holy Spirit to the disciples at the Last Supper, and it is clear that He is talking about another person who is part of the Godhead. So, the Holy Spirit is a “He” and not an “it”.

When it comes to recognising the full deity of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament has this to say:

- **2 Corinthians 3:17** – “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom”
- **Acts 5:3-4** – “Why has satan so filled our heart that you would lie to the Holy Spirit?...You have not lied to men but to God!”

Each person is fully God

In identifying these three persons as God, there is no hint that the Son is in any way less God than the Father, or that the Spirit is less God than the Son. Each person is held up unashamedly as our God who we worship, serve and adore. To support this, there are several places in the New Testament which I think of as the “mother lode” passages concerning the Trinity. These are the passages that mention all three members of the Trinity at the same time, making it clear that all three are God and all three are distinct persons existing at the same time. These passages are:

- **Mark 1:9-11** – The baptism of Jesus, where we see the Son being baptised, the Spirit descending like a dove, and the Father speaking words of affirmation from heaven. All three members active in the same event, each playing a unique part.
- **Matthew 28:18-20** – In commissioning the disciples, Jesus commands them to baptise those they teach in the “name (singular) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (plural)”.
- **2 Corinthians 13:14** – This is the “grace” that is said in many churches around the world. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all”

Understanding the Trinity

The problem and wrong analogies

This has been a theological problem for the last 2000 years, and no-one has finally nailed it yet. In the attempt to understand the Trinity, many various analogies and pictures have been put forward. It is important to recognise the limitation of analogies to express this deepest of all truths about God. Most analogies that I have heard taught all run the risk of leading people into heresy if they are taken and applied to their logical conclusion. Some of the common errors made in the attempt to understand the Trinity include:

Three Gods

This is the mistake that Mormons make. They claim to believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but what they mean is quite different to orthodox belief. They don't believe that these three make up one God, but are rather three separate "gods".

Each person is not fully God

Most common analogies fall down on this issue. Whether you are talking about a cup of tea, which consists of Tea leaves, water and milk, the egg made of the shell, yolk and albumen or St. Patrick's clover leaf which is one leaf in 3 parts. These all fall short because the Father, the Son and the Spirit are not each 1/3 of God. Each person in the Trinity is fully God, and we must be careful to maintain this in any analogy we use.

Different views of one being

A common analogy is to think of a man who is a husband, a father and a son – one person, but three roles. In preparing for today, I found some people who were proposing that we can think of the Trinity as three different views on the one God. Another common analogy in the same vein is to think of water which can exist as one of solid, fluid and gaseous state. The trouble with each of these analogies are that they can easily lead to modalism, or Sabellianism (after Sabellius) which teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are more like roles that God plays or masks that He wears. This ultimately denies that the three persons of the Trinity are really and truly distinct persons .

The most prominent modalists these days are a stream of Pentecostalism called Oneness

Pentecostalism. They deny the Trinity and prefer to think of God in the way described above. Standing against them, and other modalists throughout history, are the “mother lode” passages mentioned above where all three members of the Trinity are seen existing and operating at the same time.

Better analogies

From C. S. Lewis

While most analogies tend to fall short of fully encapsulating the truth of the Trinity, in Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis puts forward an analogy that is the best I have yet come across. The full analogy is developed in Chapter 24, “The Three-Personal God”, but the key part of the chapter is quoted below:

“You know that in space you can move in three ways - to left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of these three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two; you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body: say, a cube - a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.

“Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways - in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.

“Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings...On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine. In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube...”

The nice thing about this picture from C. S. Lewis is that it answers those who ridicule the Trinity by asking “How can $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$?” The answer is, that it doesn't. With the Trinity, we're not talking about adding persons, we're talking about multiplying them, and $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$!

Marriage

Another good picture of how something like the Trinity could exist is marriage. In the same way that Deuteronomy 6:4 proclaims God as “echad”, Genesis 2:24 teaches that when a man leaves his family and is joined to his wife, the two are become one flesh. This results in a partnership of one new being out of the two – two persons, but one being. It's only a little bit like the Trinity, but it can help none the less.

Experiencing the Trinity

The truth is that we cannot completely understand the Trinity. There will always be an element of mystery involved when we think about God existing as the Trinity². Rather than understand the Trinity, we are rather called to enter in and experience it!

The Trinity isn't actually so much a set of truths to be believed as a description of the reality of God. The Trinity describes how God has always existed and will always exist, describing how God has always experienced perfect relationship within Himself. The theological term used for this is Perichoresis, which gives us a picture of the members of the Trinity dancing in perfect harmony.

In the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together in harmony, but not in unison. Each person fulfils a distinct role. For example, in creation it would appear that the Father was the architect who made the plan, the Son was the agent of creation and the Spirit empowered the whole process as He hovered over the waters. Or looking at the incarnation, the Father had the masterplan, the Son entered into this world to do what was needed, and the Holy Spirit empowered the Son during His mission on earth.

Looking slightly further ahead in the history of the world, we see that each person of the Trinity will receive something different from the one people of God who have been redeemed from the world. The Father will receive a full family of sons. The Son will receive a body through which He will express Himself throughout the universe, AND He will receive a bride to love for all eternity. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit will receive a temple made up of living stones in which He can dwell.

Picking up the image of the dance of the Trinity, the amazing thing is that we are invited to the

2. Rather than being a problem this is actually good news as it means we can never get bored by God

dance as well! Because of what Jesus did when He was on the earth in living a perfect life, dying on the cross and exchanging His perfection for our sin, we are able to participate in the life of the Trinity. All of our lives as Christian are lived in the context of the Trinity, and each member of the Trinity is involved in each part.

For example, think of your conversion. When you heard the gospel, the Holy Spirit enabled you to see the truth about Jesus and what He did to open the way for us to be reconciled to the Father. Likewise, with our prayer and worship, the classic formula is that we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Or thinking about the enabling of God in each individual's life. I want to develop this last one a little bit as an expanded example of how each member of the Trinity is distinct and fulfils a distinct role.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Paul writes:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”

I believe that we have here a Trinitarian description of how God enables human beings to accomplish His will in the world. Taking each member as it happens in the passage. First up, the Holy Spirit gives a variety of gifts. I believe that this maps to the list of gifts that Paul goes on to mention (miracles, faith, words of wisdom and knowledge, discernment, prophecy, tongues and interpretation) – specific empowerings given by the Spirit in a moment to accomplish what God wants done.

The second is a variety of service, but the same Lord (Jesus). This can map to Ephesians 4:11, where we are told that Jesus has given a variety of ministry gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) to the church to build her up and strengthen her to maturity.

Third up is “varieties of activities, but it is the same God” (the Father). I believe that this maps to the list of gifts mentioned in Romans 12, which are gifts from the Father to every human being on this world, effectively providing our personality and a manner in which we tend to work. It might be that you tend to be merciful, or that you are prophetic by seeing right into the inner workings of

a situation and how things should be changed, or an encourager, a teacher, a leader.

So in these two verses from 1 Corinthians 12, we have a description of how each member of the Trinity provides different types of gifts that work together in perfect harmony to accomplish God's will at every level of life. This is just one example of how the Trinity co-operates seamlessly.

Conclusion

Hopefully you have been stimulated to think a bit more deeply about the Trinity, while being led to a place where you are comfortable living with a sense of mystery that accepts the Trinity is beyond our understanding. It is my prayer that the Lord will reveal Himself more to you in the days ahead, giving you greater insight into who He is and how He works in us, through us and for us, for the glory of His name. Amen!

Homework

If you would like to understand more about the Trinity, I would recommend picking up your Bible, and heading toward either Ephesians 1, or John 17.

Ephesians 1 will give you the opportunity to trace the different activities of each member of the Trinity, which will be a mental challenge, but one well worth taking up as it will inspire you to praise and worship the Lord!

John 17 contains Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane where He talks about His relationship with the Father, and prays for all those who will believe in Him. This gives us an insight into what it means to be invited into the same relationship and experience the Trinity for ourselves.

Further Resources

In researching and preparing for today, there are a variety of resources I used to learn more about the Trinity. Some of them are listed below, and are well worth checking out!

- *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles & Relevance* by Bruce A. Ware (ISBN: 978-1581346688)

- *Worshipping Trinity* by Robin Parry (ISBN: 978-1842273470)
- *Shared Life* by Donald Macleod (ISBN: 978-1857921281)
- *Delighting In The Trinity* by Tim Chester (ISBN: 978-1854246851)
- *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem (ISBN: 978-0851106526)
- *Bible Doctrine* by Wayne Grudem (ISBN: 978-0851115948)
- Darrell Johnson preaching in Basingstoke (available for free from <http://bccnet.servehttp.com/talks/Celebrations/2008/3.%20June/Darrell%20Johnson.mp3>)
- Mark Driscoll preaching at Mars Hill Church, Seattle (available for free from http://www.marshillchurch.org/audio/doctrine_wk1_trinity_033008.mp3)

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.
Amen.