

How Do You Explain the Trinity?

June 22-23, 2019

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A couple weeks ago visitors to the Willis Tower's Sky Deck in Chicago got a big scare when the protective layer covering the glass floor splintered into thousands of pieces. This glass sightseeing box extends from the 103rd floor and attracts some 1.5 million visitors each year. One eyewitness said, "*There was a woman with two kids and they looked real pale and scared because the floor just cracked.*" Understandably, people are now afraid to go out on the ledge.

As we come to the topic of the Trinity, some of us get scared because it's difficult to understand and daunting to explain. Because of that, we'd rather not go out on the ledge. On top of that, skeptics have tried to shatter and splinter Christianity with frontal attacks on the Trinity.

It's my hope when we're finished, each of us will grow in our delight of the triune God and our faith will be fortified. I was helped in this regard by a book called, *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves. Instead of being afraid, he challenges us to treasure the Trinity: "*To know the Trinity is to know God, an eternal and personal God of infinite beauty, interest and fascination. The Trinity is a God we can know and forever grow to know better.*"

Preliminary Points

Here are some preliminary points to frame our study.

1. **The word *trinity* is not found in the Bible but the truth of the Trinity is found throughout Scripture.** The word *trinity* means, "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness."
2. **We'll be doing some heavy lifting in the field of systematic theology.** Simply put, systematic theology is the answer to this question: "*What does the whole Bible say about a given topic?*" It involves searching the Scriptures to find all the verses pertaining to a subject and then putting them all together so we know what God says. "Systematic" means, "*carefully organized by topics.*" For example, many books of the Bible give information about angels (we'll be tackling this topic July 27-28). Because no one book gives all the information about angels, systematic theology

studies the entire Bible and organizes the truth into what is called angelology. We'll be doing this today with the doctrine of the Trinity.

3. **This topic will stretch our minds and that's a good thing.** Jesus summarized the first commandment in Matthew 22:37: ***"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*** Someone has said the doctrine of the Trinity is the most important Christian doctrine that most people never think about. A.W. Tozer often said, *"What comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you."*
4. **The Trinity is one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity.** Actually, it is crucial for Christianity because it concerns *who* God is, *what* He is like, *how* He works, and *how* He is to be approached. The personal fellowship between the persons of the Trinity is the scarlet thread of the Bible. Michael Reeves writes, *"Because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others."*
5. **This sermon will not answer all your questions but I hope you'll grow in your awe of our awesome God.** Dr. Sanjay Merchant, a professor at Moody Bible Institute, sent me his extensive explanation of the Trinity. Here's how he begins: *"Some consider the doctrine of the Trinity to be an impenetrable paradox, resulting from theological nit-picking, a technical addendum to our shared faith with little practical significance for the Christian life. On the contrary, the Trinity is the central mystery of Christianity, disclosing edifying truths about God's nature and revealing the deep logic of the gospel."*

Here's the outline we'll follow.

- **Exposition** – *what does the Bible say about the Trinity?* Our approach will be to allow the Scriptures to speak as we see how the doctrine of the Trinity progressively unfolds.
- **Explanation** – *how can we state the Trinity?* We'll look at the best way to describe the Trinity, giving attention to some of the early creeds of Christianity.

- **Illustrations** – *how can we understand the Trinity?* We'll consider some of the more common metaphors and show why each one is ultimately inadequate.
- **Application** – *how can we apply the doctrine of the Trinity today?* As we delight in the Trinity we'll discover a number of practical applications.

Exposition – What Does the Bible Say About the Trinity?

Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, writes: “*The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. To study the Bible’s teachings on the Trinity gives us great insight into the question that is at the center of all of our seeking after God: What is God like in Himself? Here we learn that in Himself, in His very being, God exists in the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet there is one God.*”

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, several passages point to plurality in the Godhead.

- Genesis 1:26: “*Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’”*
- Genesis 3:22: “*Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil...’”*
- Genesis 11:7: “*Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.*”
- Isaiah 6:8: “*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I (singular) send, and who will go for us (plurality)?’”*

There’s more explicit evidence for the Trinity in the New Testament with the coming of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Here are some key passages where all three persons of the Trinity are named together.

- Matthew 3:16-17: “*And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” Grudem points out, “*At this one precise moment all three members of the Trinity are performing three distinct activities. God the Father is speaking from Heaven; God the Son is being baptized and is**

then spoken to from Heaven by God the Father; and God the Holy Spirit is descending from Heaven to rest upon and empower Jesus for ministry.”

- Matthew 28:19 describes the Great Commission, charging us to **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”** Our task of evangelism and discipleship is distinctively Trinitarian.
- 2 Corinthians 13:14: **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”**
- 1 Peter 1:2: **“According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.”**
- Jude 20-21: **“But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”**

Let’s consider three statements which summarize what the Bible teaches.

1. There is One God. The Bible is clear there is one and only one God. He is only one being, not three Gods.

- Deuteronomy 6:4: **“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”**
- Isaiah 45:5-6: **“I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.”**
- Romans 3:30: **“Since God is one...”**
- James 2:19: **“You believe that God is one; you do well...”**

2. God is Three Persons. This means the Father is not the Son and not the Holy Spirit. The Son is not the Father and not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father and not the Son. God is one in essence, three in Person.

- John 14:16-17: **“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”**

- John 14:26: *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”*
- John 15:26: *“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”*

3. Each Person is Fully God. One isn't the other, and each member of the Trinity is equal in rank, power, glory and majesty. There are a multitude of verses establishing the Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct and divine but for the sake of time, we'll just look at one for each.

- **The Father is God.** Malachi 2:10: *“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?”*
- **The Son is God.** After Thomas expressed his doubts he boldly declared the deity of Christ in John 20:28: *“My Lord and my God!”*
- **The Holy Spirit is God.** In Acts 5:3-4, Peter asks Ananias, *“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...You have not lied to man but to God.”*

Explanation – How Can We State the Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity comes directly from the pages of Scripture and the biblical authors were utterly captivated by our triune God. Ray Pritchard writes: *“We find evidence for oneness, evidence for threeness, and evidence for three-in-oneness. By carefully pulling all the evidence together, and without slighting any part of the evidence in favor of other evidence, we arrive at the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity...”*

Millard Erickson offers this helpful summary: *“The doctrine of the Trinity must be divinely revealed, not humanly constructed. It is so absurd from a human standpoint that no one would have invented it...try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind; but try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul.”*

Here's how the doctrine of the Trinity is spelled out in the Edgewood Doctrinal Statement: *“That in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - equal in every divine perfection and executing distinct but harmonious offices in the great work of redemption.”*

Due in large part to the difficulty in explaining the Trinity, various heresies surfaced in the history of the early church, some of which are still hanging around today.

- **Modalism** teaches that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different names for the same God acting in different roles or modes. Modern day Modalists would be *United Apostolics* and *Oneness Pentecostals*.
- **Monarchianism** teaches there is only one Person and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit subsist as impersonal attributes. This is what *Unitarians* believe.
- **Arianism** is named after a popular heretic named Arius and denies the full deity of Jesus Christ. Arius taught there was a time the Son did not exist. This is what *Jehovah Witnesses* and *Muslims* believe.
- **Tri-theism** teaches there are three separate Gods. This is what *Mormons* believe.

In order to correct these errors the early Church developed concise creedal statements. The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means, “*I believe.*” These were important because in an age when people didn’t have their own Bibles, these brief statements of belief summarized biblical orthodoxy while combatting heresy.

BTW, links to all three Trinitarian creeds, along with Ray Pritchard’s book, *Credo*, are posted on Sermon Extras.

1. The Apostles Creed. This creed affirms a belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit: “*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord...I believe in the Holy Spirit.*”

2. The Nicene Creed. In order to clarify the Trinity in greater detail, the Nicene Creed was developed in AD 325, taking its final form in AD 381. Notice how developed the doctrine of the Trinity is:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father...And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He

proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

3. The Athanasian Creed. This robust statement of Trinitarian belief from the 5th Century is the strongest and the longest of the three. I'll just quote some of it but I commend all of it to you.

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal. What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has...and yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being...we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity. Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity."

Illustrations – How Can We Understand the Trinity?

In an effort to understand the intricacies of the doctrine of the Trinity, a number of metaphors and analogies have been set forth. I would say there are strengths and liabilities in each of them. While some are helpful at an elementary level, we need to be cautious because many of them are like a shattered glass floor.

In my research, I discovered 10 different analogies but before I list them, let's keep Romans 11:33 in mind: ***"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"***

- 1. Three-leaf Clover.** A clover has three different leaves and yet is one clover.
- 2. Tree.** A tree is made up of roots, trunk and branches.
- 3. Water.** Water can exist in three states – liquid, ice and vapor.
- 4. Statues.** Think of three identical statues emerging from a single pool of liquid gold.
- 5. Sun.** The Father is the sun (that's already confusing), the Son is the light coming from the sun, and the Holy Spirit is the heat.
- 6. A person with different roles.** For example, I am one person but also a husband, a father and a pastor.

- 7. **A person with different parts.** This analogy says just as we're made up of intellect, emotions and the will, so God is one person with three parts.
- 8. **Egg.** The white, the yoke and the shell are different parts, yet comprise one egg.

I'm not smart enough to understand the final two but if you're into music theory or chemistry they may make some sense to you.

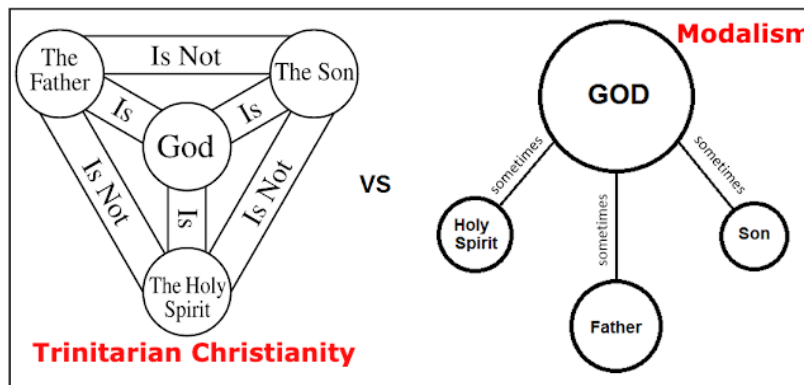
- 9. **Musical chord.** Using the key of C Major, the first, third and fifth notes have distinct sounds yet make up one sound as they all blend together.
- 10. **Resonance structures of Nitrate.** In resonance structures the electrons bond between atoms in such a way that the electrons have to "bounce" between the bonds to stabilize them. In the case of nitrate, this gives three unique structures with the electron falling in three different places. BTW, this analogy helped former Muslim Nabeel Qureshi understand the Trinity.

Again, while some elements of these illustrations are insightful, many of them lean toward Arianism, Modalism or Partialism.

Play Video. Watch this video of a missionary trying to explain the Trinity.

Actually, the best illustration in the Bible is the incarnation. In John 14:9, Jesus declares, *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* In Colossians 1:15 we read Jesus is the *"image of the invisible God"* and Hebrews 1:3 proclaims, *"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature."*

The following visual illustration is helpful because it shows how God is one in essence existing as three distinct Persons in contrast to the error of Modalism.



Application – How Can We Apply the Doctrine of the Trinity?

Instead of seeing the doctrine of the Trinity sticking out from the side of Christianity only to be understood by dusty theologians, let's focus on how this applies to our lives today.

- 1. The Trinity teaches us to treasure who God is.** If you're feeling spiritually shallow or even apathetic, it's time to ascend the staggering, Trinitarian heights of the nature of God. Dr. Merchant writes: *“Meditating on divine tri-unity is both an intellectual activity and an expression of reverence as we strive to know and love the glorious God who first loved us.”* To be wrong about God is to be wrong about one's eternal destiny.

John Calvin once wrote if we try to think about God without thinking about the Father, Son and Spirit, then *“only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”*

- 2. The Trinity puts us in our proper place.** God didn't create the world because He was lonely. He has always existed as Trinity and love has eternally flowed between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. He made you not because He needs you; He created you because He loves you. He didn't do it because of what He lacked, but rather, He was so filled with joy that His delight overflowed into His creation. One author writes, *“As believers, we will be forever caught in the eternal crossfire of Trinitarian love and affection.”*

No sermon would be complete without a quote from Charles Spurgeon: *“No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God...But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity.”*

- 3. The Trinity gives us a model for unity and community.** To describe the work of the Father, Son and Spirit, scholars use the term *perichoresis*, which literally means, *“dancing around.”* Each member of the Trinity is in a divine dance interacting with one another, expressing love for one another, and complementing the work each has to do. God is in relationship in a way we are not in relationship. Or better, God is in relationship in the way we were intended to be in relationship and are invited to be in relationship.

Just as there has always been holy harmony within the Trinity, so too we are called to be one with every other born again believer. Two weeks ago we referenced the prayer Jesus prayed the night before He died. Listen to it again from John 17:20-23: ***“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”***

Our oneness is somehow grounded in the oneness between the Father and the Son! As God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit relate to one another, demonstrate love for one another, and work in concert to accomplish the purpose of God in the world, we must do the same!

4. **Treasuring the Trinity helps us understand Christianity.** I don't have time to delve into the depths of this but doctrines like the incarnation, the crucifixion of Christ, propitiation, substitutionary atonement, the resurrection, the ascension and the Second Coming only make sense within the truth of the Trinity. Salvation comes to us from the Father, through the Son, by means of the Holy Spirit
5. **Understanding this doctrine enables you to spot error.** A true knowledge of the Trinity will help you discern false doctrine. 2 Timothy 4:3-4: ***“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”***
6. **Embracing the Trinity accelerates evangelism.** When you're witnessing, remember you are an ambassador of the Triune God! Listen to how the entire Trinity is involved in John 20:21-22: ***“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”*** Whatever work we do is to be done from the standpoint of the Triune God, who created, redeemed and enabled us to do so. One pastor writes, *“Preaching a generic god to hopeless sinners is*

worthless...the world needs to hear about a triumphant, sovereign, sinner saving, devil defeating, sin conquering, death destroying, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, righteous, loving, wrathful, triune God.”

7. **Delighting in the Trinity is a motivation for baptism.** Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples of our neighbors and the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20). When a believer is immersed in the water and baptized in the name of the Trinity, he or she is recognizing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are with them. Since the totality of the Trinity is actively engaged in baptism, how can we not but submit and surrender our lives in service? Our next baptism service is Sunday, August 18.

8. **A proper view of the Trinity teaches us how to pray.** One of the questions submitted for this series is: *“Do I pray to Jesus or the Father?”* In general, the pattern found in the Bible is to pray to our Father in the name of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. God the Father hears us because of the merits of God the Son through the agency of God the Holy Spirit. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He said this in Matthew 6:9: ***“Our Father in heaven...”***

Having said that, it’s certainly not wrong to pray to Jesus as Stephen did in Acts 7:59-60: ***“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’”*** Since all three members of the Trinity are God, worship is due to each.

I know we’ve covered a lot of ground that may seem confusing or unimportant to you, but here’s the one thing I want you to take away today: *The foundation of the Trinity is rock solid. It will never shatter or splinter.* The Trinity is not some addendum or appendage hanging precariously from the building of the Gospel. No, the Trinity is the foundation of the gospel and without the Trinity there is no Gospel. There is much more to know about God’s glorious being and His triune nature. Press on to know Him better today than you did yesterday and better tomorrow than you do today.

Let’s allow the wonder of this mystery to lead us to worship His majesty, God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Closing Song: “Holy, Holy, Holy”

Update on Matt’s surgery

Celebration of Ed

Recognition of Dave Bennett (Riley)

Closing Benediction: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”* (2 Corinthians 13:14)