

# Trinity: What's the big deal?

## A forgotten doctrine?

*"If Trinity is supposed to describe the very heart of the nature of God, and yet it has almost no practical or pastoral implications in most of our lives...if it's even possible that we could drop it tomorrow and it would be a forgettable, throwaway doctrine...then either it can't be true or we don't understand it!" - Richard Rohr*

For many people, the notion of the 'Trinity' – God eternally existing as three distinct Persons, each fully divine in themselves, yet remaining one God – is nothing more than an academic curiosity or quaint theological twist. It seemingly has no real practical application, except perhaps for helping to make sense of the incarnation of Christ (God being in two places at once) or assisting with our understanding of atonement (only God could bring reconciliation). Nothing could be further from the truth! In this session, we will first look at the biblical basis for our understanding of Trinity, then explore the vast implications for everything we are and do.



## Is Trinity in the Bible?

The word 'trinity' itself is not biblical – it is a later attempt to express the 'three in oneness' (tri-unity) of God. However, trinity is revealed in Scripture as an unfolding revelation, with hints in the Old Testament and fuller understanding in the New. Recalling our study of the nature of the Bible, we understand that the Scriptures are a *progressive revelation*, with later writings showing greater depth of understanding and development of thought about God. This is very evident in the case of the Trinity. Also, we remember that New Testament books were not written to describe or define doctrine, but simply assume it in many cases. It was left to later generations to grapple with the truth revealed in Scripture and to try to understand what the Holy Spirit was revealing through the written Word.

## The three Persons

The Bible reveals each Person of the Trinity as fully divine. This is very clear with God the Father, especially in the way Jesus related and prayed to his Father in heaven. Then there are several clear references to Jesus, the Son, being God himself (e.g. John 1:1-4, 8:58, 20:28, Heb 1:3, 8, Tit 2:13, 2 Pe 1:1, Rom 9:5, Isa 9:6). A few of these passages have possible

alternative readings given in some translations, which could suggest a different viewpoint, however in all cases the primary translation (Christ as God) is grammatically and theologically the most likely – and some of the passages are clear enough as to be undisputed (except by cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose interpretation is very wide of the mark. They believe that Jesus was a created being, which was a heresy widely promoted by Arius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century but eventually strongly rejected by the church – especially by Athanasius.)



The Holy Spirit is equated with God in various ways in passages such as Acts 5:3-4, 1 Cor 3:16, Ps 139:7-8, 1 Cor 2:10-11, John 3:5-7 c.f. 1 Jn 3:9, as well as in many trinitarian passages to which we will shortly turn.

So, the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. However, the whole Bible is adamant that there is only *one* God. This was a major distinguishing mark of Israel over all the other nations and is confirmed in the New Testament (see Deu 6:4-5, Isa 45:5-6, 1Ti 2:5, Jas 2:19 among many others.)

The twin facts that the three Persons, Father, Son and Spirit, are all God and that there is only one God, taken on their own would lead us to conclude that God has three different 'hats' – three personas that he adopts at different times depending on circumstances, like an actor playing several roles. This is the heresy known as 'modalism' (God having three 'modes' of appearing) which, again, was rejected by the early church<sup>1</sup>. Why did they do this? Because the Bible clearly portrays personal interactions between the three Persons which indicate that they are individuals, not the same Person, for example at the baptism of Jesus where the Father speaks and the Spirit descends like a dove, or where Jesus prays to the Father, or where the Spirit or the Son intercede for us before the Father.

But surely – if God exists as three Persons, if the whole fabric of God is plural, then that must come through strongly in the Bible? Well, it does... starting right at the beginning.

## Trinity in the Old Testament

In Genesis 1:26 God says, 'Let *us* make mankind in our image, in our likeness'. Some have suggested that this is the 'plural of majesty' – the 'royal we'. However, this is unknown in OT Hebrew. Others suggest God

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<sup>1</sup> The 'United Pentecostal Church' is the only modern Protestant denomination with modalist beliefs. They were forced out of the Assemblies of God because of it. They insist on believers being baptised solely in the name of Jesus, not Father, Son and Spirit, since they do not believe in the Trinity.

was talking to the angels – but human beings are not created in the image of angels or by angels. Early Christian theologians were united in believing that in the first chapter of the Bible we have God revealing himself as a plurality. (See also Gen 3:22, 11:7, Isa 6:8 – note the combination of singular and plural in the last passage.)

In Psalm 45:6-7, two distinct persons are referred to as God (quoted in Heb 1:8). It is similar in Psalm 110:1, which again is often quoted in the New Testament. In Isaiah 48:16, we seem to have references to all three Persons: 'And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, endowed with his Spirit', the speaker being the 'servant of the Lord'. Isaiah could be speaking of himself, however it is the servant (the Messiah) who is endowed with the Spirit a few chapters before (Isa 42:1).



## Trinity in the New Testament

When the astonishing revelation came that the Messiah, the coming Davidic ruler, was also simultaneously God's divine Son, the way was finally open for God to reveal his plural nature in more depth. And this is what we see in the pages of the New Testament, as the writers gradually came to the realisation that there were three divine Persons, individual, yet remaining together as one God.

The Trinity is revealed at the start and the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, first at his baptism (Mat 3:16-17) where the Father speaks and the Spirit descends on the Son, then in the Great Commission (Mat 28:19):

*'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'*

The names Father and Son emphasise personhood and family relationship. The fact that the Holy Spirit is referred to in exactly the same way is a strong indicator that the Spirit is a Person like the others. It is interesting that 'name' is singular – there is only one name, not three, emphasising that there is one God. However, the repetition of 'and of the' seems to emphasise the individuality of the three Persons, rather than saying the name of Father, Son and Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is accurately portrayed in that one verse!

When we realise that the New Testament usually refers to God the Father as 'God' (theos), and to Christ as 'Lord' (kyrios), then we start to see other Trinitarian expressions scattered through the NT:

*1 Cor 12:4-6 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same **Spirit** distributes them. <sup>5</sup>There are different kinds of service, but the same **Lord**. <sup>6</sup>There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same **God** at work.*

2 Cor 13:14 May the grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all.

Eph 4:4-6 There is one body and one **Spirit**, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; <sup>5</sup> one **Lord**, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one **God and Father** of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

1 Pet 1:2 ...chosen according to the foreknowledge of **God the Father**, through the sanctifying work of the **Spirit**, to be obedient to **Jesus Christ** and sprinkled with his blood...

Jude 20-21 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the **Holy Spirit**, <sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in **God's** love as you wait for the mercy of our **Lord Jesus Christ** to bring you to eternal life.

## Do the Persons have different roles?

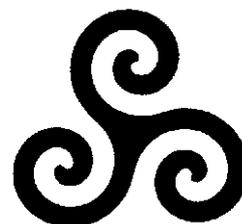
It is clear from the New Testament teaching that Father, Son and Spirit play different parts in their interaction with creation and especially in the work of salvation. The Son submits to the Father in the incarnation, the Holy Spirit is sent out from the Father at the request of the Son. But does this indicate a hierarchy of authority in God that existed from eternity past, or was this simply the way God chose to work in his interactions with his creation? The answer to this question is critical in our understanding of God, ourselves and in fact everything else.

Some people believe there is an *eternal* subordination of the Son to the Father (and Spirit to Father and Son), and use this as a justification for asserting differing roles between the sexes in marriage and church leadership. However, this supposed eternal hierarchy within God would mean that the three Persons were not actually equal, and this was largely rejected by the early church. The early Christians, in reflecting on the words in the Bible, came to visualise the Trinity not as a pyramid of authority but a circle of relationship. It was not thought of as a static circle, but a living, moving circular flow, like a dance. They gave it the name 'perichoresis' (to move around).

## Discussion time...

Do you think having a good theology of the Trinity is important to our everyday lives and if so, why?

What happens if we don't keep the concept of Trinity central to our understanding of God?



## Part 2: Impact of Trinitarian theology

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

"We can never know who or what we are till we know at least something of what God is." – A.W. Tozer

Our view of God determines how we live. A trinitarian understanding of God will deeply affect every sphere of our lives and will shape our view of all other doctrines and theology.

The author Baxter Krueger<sup>2</sup> describes the Trinity as 'The Great Dance', where the three Persons of the Trinity exist eternally together in a glorious and harmonious movement, like a dance, sharing life together and exchanging love. Each of the three prefers, honours and promotes the others, completely in union but still as distinct Persons. In this circle of self-



giving relationship there is no hierarchy or order of importance. None of the Persons are dominant. Rather they enjoy, bless and love each other from eternity past to eternity future.

In the outworking of creation and redemptive love towards human beings these divine Persons take on differing roles, but always in full partnership and cooperation with the others – one God, acting in love, with the creativity and self-disclosing, self-giving nature of Trinity at the heart of every action and word. The very familiar phrase in 1 John 4:8, 'God is love' points us in this direction. For love to exist, there must be more than one person present. There has to be one person to be loved and another doing the loving. If God has always been 'love' from eternity past, before there was any created being for him to express love to, then the only logical explanation is that *God exists in community with himself*. He is Relationship personified. That is the essence of God.

So much flows from this understanding. We know that, as human beings, we are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and that as followers of Jesus we are being transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18). As God's people, we are a 'planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour' (Isa 60:21, 61:3). In other words, the true vocation of humanity is to be the image of God on the earth. If the essence of that image is *loving relationship*, then that is the key to how we demonstrate God's nature. 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,' (John 13:35).

<sup>2</sup> *The Great Dance – the Christian vision revisited*, C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis Press, 2000.

The understanding of Trinity as a non-hierarchical circle of self-giving relationship means that we, the image of Trinity within creation, are to reflect the same thing. This is the foundation for so many areas of life.

### Church and Leadership

Trinity means that the nature of the Church is to be understood as a *family* above all else. It is not an organisation, a business venture, an army, a hospital or a teaching establishment. It is to reflect the diversity-in-unity and the others-focussed, self-outpouring nature of the life within the Trinity, both to its own members and to the world in general. We are to be an incarnate picture of Trinitarian love, expressing God's faithfulness, sacrifice, humility and joy with generous abandon!

Echoing the Trinity, Christian leadership in a locality is to be plural (always more than one leader) and non-hierarchical: not rigid lines of authority and grades of importance, but diversity of function based on God's appointing and gifting, always with mutual submission and a servant heart towards all, where no one is 'senior' to anyone else.

### Trinity and mission

The nature of the Trinity also changes our understanding of 'mission'. We have often thought of mission as God's rescue plan to undo the effects of sin and the Fall. In fact, Trinity shows us that mission is eternal. It is a reflection of God's self-revealing nature. He has *always* been revealing his nature – each Person of the Trinity opening their heart and thoughts to the others, even before creation. Mission, therefore, is the revealing of God's glory to the whole of creation, especially at the present time to 'lost' humanity to reveal what he has done for them.



### Final thoughts – our place in the Trinity

One of the most amazing things about Trinity is where it places us as human beings. In passages such as John 17, we see a union between the Persons of the Trinity and between ourselves and God. It is as though the three Persons, together performing this Great Dance from eternity past, have opened the circle and extended their arms towards humanity in order to draw them in and include them in the dance. We are in union with the Trinity. We are seated on the throne as co-heirs and co-rulers with Christ (Rom 8:17, Rev 3:21). The rightful place of all human beings is within the Great Dance. Being truly human is to 'participate in the divine nature' (2Pe 1:4) and to reflect God in every facet of life.

*"At the centre of the universe there is a relationship . . . It is out of that relationship that we were created and redeemed, and it is for that relationship we were created and redeemed." – Darrell Johnson*