



God is ... Three in One (*Deuteronomy 6:4-15; John 16:12-15; 17:20-26*)

INTRODUCTION

Today we are going to look at one of the most debated aspects of the study of God, the Trinity. It is debated for two main reasons. One is because there is not clear statement in the Bible that explains the Trinity. Paul didn't sit down and write a treatise on it as he did in Romans where he explains salvation and how Jews and Gentiles both find salvation through faith – in fact have always found salvation through faith and not works. The Bible does clearly teach about the Trinity but doesn't lay out the doctrine in a nice clear statement for us to read. Secondly, the doctrine is debated because it is not something that it is easy for finite minds like ours to comprehend. It is one of those areas in which God is not like us and so we struggle to understand something outside our experience. We'd like a simple, one-sentence declaration and this just is not possible.

This morning, we will look briefly at how the idea is revealed in Scripture and discussed in the early centuries of the church. Then we will look at a couple of implications of the Trinity in our lives.

The early church spent much time trying to outline the doctrine of the Trinity and the place of the Father, Son and Spirit in that unity. Coming out of these discussions, the church adopted some early creeds that are still used in the church today. You probably have said one of these creeds in your church life. The Apostles Creed was adopted very early – probably by the end of the 2nd century. A couple of hundred years later, the Nicene Creed was adopted which gives more detail about each member of the Trinity and their relationship to each other. I thought it would be good to begin our exploration this morning by saying this creed together, as a statement of our beliefs. Will you stand with me and say it together? The version we will say is a more recent translation of the creed which seeks to use language that is more understandable for us today so it may be slightly different to what you are used to.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, visible and invisible.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy universal and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.
AMEN.

EXPLAINING THE TRINITY

So, that is what we believe, where does it come from? To answer that question we'll start by looking at the Bible – as we should always do in working out what is true!

As we look at the Bible, we see that the truth about God as Three in One, was progressively revealed by God throughout redemptive history, culminating in the incarnation of the Son and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. God has always been Three in One, but he has revealed this to us over time and in different ways.

In the Old Testament, as He revealed Himself to Israel in His covenant relationship with them, God began by showing them that He was one God. Our reading from Deuteronomy 6 is the key passage for this. It is so key that Jews have recited it daily for thousands of years and still do so today. "*Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One*" (Deuteronomy 6:4) This was the central tenet of their relationship with God and they were to place this statement in prominent places so that they were constantly reminded of it as they went through their day. Every other religion of their day consisted of a multitude of regional gods. The Israelites were totally different in that they believed in one, universal, creator God. As we saw in Joshua, there was a constant pull towards worship of the surrounding gods. The Israelites were to resist this pull and be loyal to the one God who created the world and ruled it in love. This is the focus of God's revelation in the Old Testament.

However, there are hints in the Old Testament that the situation is more complex. Starting at creation, we see plural nouns used to refer to God. When God is creating humanity, he says, "Let us make man in our image". (Genesis 1:26) We also see God in action in ways that involve the members of the Trinity. Several times there are appearances of the "angel – or messenger - of the Lord" which also refer to this appearance as being that of God himself. These are probably appearances of Jesus as "God with skin on" before his birth as man. Also we see the "Spirit of the Lord" enabling people to serve God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. These different activities are

not analysed or explained by the Old Testament writers, but they are clear to us as we look back in light of later revelation.

With the incarnation of Jesus, the references to the Three members of the Trinity become clearer. In talking to Mary, the angel says, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God." (Luke 1:35). Here we see the Holy Spirit doing the will of the Father in the conception of the Son. And when Jesus is baptised The Father speaks His blessing on the Son and the Spirit comes upon Jesus in the form like a dove. (Matt 3:16-17) All three members of the Trinity are in evidence.*

Jesus often talks of his Father and the difference, and yet the unity, of the two of them as God. This is what often got him in trouble with the religious leaders of his day. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus speaks most clearly about this to his disciples, particularly introducing the Holy Spirit and the role He would play in their lives. In the first passage from John in our readings, we see an instance where Jesus talks about all three members of the Trinity. After explaining how the Spirit will help them to understand the truth after Jesus leaves them, He says, "*All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he (Holy Spirit) will take what is mine and declare it to you.*" (John 16:15) Here we see that the Father gives to the Son and the Spirit shares it with the believers. This is the Trinity in action. Jesus solidifies the deity of the Father, Son and Spirit in the Great Commission as he says, "*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*" (Matthew 28:19). There is no doubt that Jesus' idea of God is trinitarian.

In the writing of the apostles it is assumed by them that Jesus is God, as is the Holy Spirit. The three are brought together in places such as the blessings in 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.*" and 2 Peter 1:1,2, "*To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 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: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.*"

The concept of the Trinity is clearly present in the Bible. A concept which becomes clearer as God's redemption unfolds from the beginning to the end of Scripture. However, the 'mechanics' of the concept is not explicitly explained and the term 'Trinity' is not used in the Bible. As the early church sought to clarify their beliefs and guard against deviation from the truth, they had to find ways to define God and His existence as Three in One. They did this largely by defining what the Trinity is NOT.

Firstly, they decided that the three persons of the Trinity are not different modes of existence of the one God. It is not a true way of thinking to say that the one God operates in three different modes – He doesn't become human during the time Jesus is on the earth and then becomes spirit to indwell His people as the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, Jesus and the Spirit are in evidence in the Old Testament – even at the moment of creation. There have always been three in one – God does not 'become' the Son and the Spirit as needed. Sometimes we edge towards this error when we use the illustration of the Trinity being like water which sometimes is ice, sometimes liquid and sometimes gas. A particular molecule of H₂O cannot be ice, water and steam all at once. But God is always Father Son and Spirit – all at once.

Secondly, the church decided that the three persons of the Trinity and not just three different parts of God. This puts the emphasis too strongly on the idea that God is three and can, if taken to an extreme, lose sight of the truth that God is one. If you are not careful, you end up with three Gods rather than one. One illustration that we use to explain the Trinity which has this problem is when we compare the Trinity to an egg – there are three parts to an egg, shell, white and yolk but it is all one egg. The problem with this is that the shell, white and yolk are very different to each other –

they have very different structures. The three persons in the Trinity are of the same essence – they are not different to each other in that way. And the three persons of the Trinity are inseparable, you cannot have one without the other.

To be honest, I don't know if I have come across an illustration of the Trinity which really explains it well! These two – of water and the egg – each have value, but they also have their problems. I personally have come to the conclusion that I have to hold God's oneness and God's threeness in tension and accept that I will never be able to come up with an way to explain it that does it justice! This kind of tension is not uncommon in Christianity because God is bigger and more complex than we can truly understand. At a certain point, we must accept Him in faith and not try to have all the answers. Theology is extremely useful in helping us to understand God's truth, but it has its limitations!

THEREFORE ...

So, what difference does all this make in our relationship with God and our daily lives here today? I believe it helps us to better understanding God's plan and purposes for us as we see the different roles of the three persons of the Trinity and catch a glimpse of God's ultimate goal of His plan.

Different roles

Firstly, thinking about the Trinity helps us to understand God's work better as we see the three persons of the Trinity involved in unfolding God's plan for this world. We will look at this in more detail in a few weeks when we look at who God is in relation to us, but taking a quick look at it now, we can see that the persons of the Trinity have different roles to play.

- In **creation**, God the Father is the orchestrator of creation, Jesus is the agent – creation happens through him, and the Holy Spirit is the 'breath of God' the life-giver.
- As God **reveals** Himself to us, God the Father is the source of all truth, Jesus is the embodiment of truth and the Spirit illuminates or explains the truth to us.
- As we look at the **redemption**, The Father is the author of our salvation, Jesus is the actor through whom salvation is enacted, and the Holy Spirit applies salvation to us.
- In the **church**, God has elected His people from before the foundation of the world, Jesus is the head of the church and its bridegroom and the Holy Spirit builds the church in unity and gifts the church with what it needs to carry out the mission of God.

God's purpose unfolds throughout history and is enacted through all three persons of the Trinity working together and yet with distinct roles. Father, Son and Spirit are all necessary. Each one supports, points to and glorifies the others. It is one God, pursuing one purpose through all three persons.

A spreading goodness

The second concept which we get from thinking about the Trinity comes from an early Puritan theologian and pastor in England named Richard Sibbes. When we think of Puritans, we often picture a rather dower, legalistic perspective, but Sibbes was definitely not that way. His heart was captured by Jesus' prayer found in John 17 and it shaped his picture of God and His purposes for us. This concept has influenced my thought considerably and so I'd like to tell you the story – the story of a spreading goodness.

Before there was anything else, there was God, existing forever in perfect love and unity within the Trinity. The Father loved the Son and the Spirit, the Son loved the Father and the Spirit and the

Spirit loved the Father and Son. Jesus described this love by saying, “ ... you, Father, are in me, and I in you, ... you loved me before the foundation of the world...” (John 17:?)

Father, Son and Spirit existed forever in this perfect love and fellowship. They didn't need anyone or anything more, but out of that perfect love came the desire to share this love more broadly, for perfect love always desires to give and share. So God decided to create our world, our existence. He created humanity in his image so that we could relate to him and become a part of the circle of love that He enjoyed within the Trinity. God's desire was that we would have loving fellowship with him and with each other in the world He had created.

Because God desired us to respond to His love freely, God made us with the ability to choose to love – or choose to not love. A robot-like servitude could not be a reflection and extension of His love. With this freedom came risk, but it was the only way to make love real. And sure enough, as God knew from eternity would be the case, we chose to turn our backs on God and go our own way. And in this choosing, we became slaves to the sin which had tempted us away from God. Even though He knew it would happen, we cannot begin to understand the pain this caused God as His love was rejected.

But God still loved the world – the people he created in the perfect world he had made for them. He couldn't turn His back on them when they turned their back on Him. He set into motion His plan, conceived in eternity and brought to pass in time and space. His plan to bring us back into His circle of love, the love shared between the Trinity for eternity.

To this end, He sent the Son into the world to become human like us. The Son lived among us and experienced our joys and pains. He showed God's love and goodness in the healing He brought and the things that He said. And in the fulness of time, He took on our rebellion and sin and died to free us from the penalty and power of sin, rising again to bring his victory to all of us. Why did he do this? As he says in His prayer to the Father – *“That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”* (John 17:?)

Through Christ, once again, the circle of love was open to all who responded in faith to God's salvation. *“But to all those who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”.* (John 1:12) God's love is poured out into our hearts by the Spirit. And, as we experience the love of God, we are bound to each other in love. As God's people, Christ's body, we are a visible expression of God's eternal fellowship. As such, we witness to God's salvation and draw others into this love relationship with God.

God's plan is for the love between the members of the Trinity to overflow to His creation. All who respond are drawn into their eternal love and fellowship. This results in a spreading goodness that overcomes the darkness of sin and death.

How wonderful to be a part of something like this!