

## Foundations of the Christian Faith: The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith. It is crucial if we are to properly understand what God is like, how He relates to us, and how we should relate to Him.

But it also raises many difficult questions. How can God be both one and three? If Jesus is God, why do the Gospels record instances where He prayed to God? How do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another in the Godhead?

While we cannot fully understand everything about the Trinity, it is possible to answer questions like these and come to a solid grasp of what it means for God to be three in one.

One of the first Bible verses I remember learning is called the Shema, it comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Therein lies one of the most basic beliefs of the Christian faith, that is that the Lord God is one and that He is the one and only true God. This truth is repeated throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Let me give you some examples:

“See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me” (Exodus 32:39)

“There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.” (1 Samuel 2:2)

“This is what the Lord says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” (Isaiah 44:6)

“There is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:21-22)

(“There is.....one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:6)

“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:28-30)

When Jesus was asked what is the most important commandment, he replied, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Jesus considered the oneness of God to be of greatest importance. Obviously, if Jesus thought and taught that, so should we.

Anyone who denies the oneness of God cannot be called a Christian. Christians do believe, however, that this one God is known in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is called the doctrine of the Trinity and is one of the most difficult concepts within the Christian faith to understand.

Before we get into a proper understanding of the Trinity, let’s examine some of the false teachings on the Trinity which have appeared throughout history and are still alive today.

One of the most common heresies is called Modalism. This teaches that God is one but that God plays different roles or modes at different times. As the Father, God created the world; as the Son, he redeemed it; as the Holy Spirit, he sanctifies the elect.

According to Modalism, during the incarnation, Jesus was simply God acting in one mode or role, and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was God acting in a different mode. Thus, God does not exist as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time. Rather, God is one person and has merely made himself known in these three roles at various times. Modalism thus denies the basic distinctiveness and coexistence of the three persons of the Trinity.

Many modern illustrations which seek to explain the Trinity tend towards this heresy. Take for instance, the illustration that the Trinity is like water, sometimes we see water as a vapor like steam or fog, sometimes we see water as a liquid, and sometimes we see water as a solid in ice. The problem with this illustration is that each of these forms of water do not co-exist. Water cannot be steam, liquid and solid all at the same time. Each are different modes of the same substance, we experience in different ways at different times. In a proper understanding of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all co-exist at the same time but are distinct from each other.

Another common heresy is called Tritheism. This is the belief that there are really three gods, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who share the same substance but are

completely distinct from each other. This is one of the chief heresies taught by the Mormons still today.

A third heresy of the Trinity is called Arianism. This teaches that Jesus Christ did not co-exist with the Father before time, but rather that He was the first of all creation. The Jehovah's Witnesses hold to a belief about Christ that is very similar to Arianism, that is that Christ is not an equal with the Father, but is a lesser god.

Let me mention one more and that is Docetism. Docetism is an ancient heresy that says Jesus was not fully human. According to Docetism, he seemed to be human, but because Jesus was fully divine, he had no physical body. The form people saw was essentially a ghost. People today can slip into this heresy by over emphasizing the divine nature of Jesus Christ and understating his humanity.

There are several other heresies surrounding the Trinity that have appeared throughout history which aren't as common today. Still, I think it's important we recognize these false teaching. Remember how Jesus said, "and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." Matthew 24:11 One of our roles as shepherds of God's people is to protect them from these false prophets and the heresies they teach.

Now let's get into a proper understanding of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This definition expresses three crucial truths: (1) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons. As we talked about, they are not simply different roles that God plays. (2) each Person is fully God, (3) as we have also talked about there is only one God.

The Bible speaks of the Father as God (Phil. 1:2), Jesus as God (Titus 2:13), and the Holy Spirit as God (Acts 5:3-4).

The Father sent the Son into the world (John 3:17), so we see that the Father is distinct from the Son. After the Son returned to the Father, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into the world (John 14:26), so we see that the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son.

In the baptism of Jesus, we witness all three persons of the Godhead working separately but also at the same time. The Father speaks his love for his Son, the

Spirit descends like a dove as Jesus the Son comes up out of the water. (Mark 1:10-11)

John 1:1-2 says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” This affirms that Jesus is God and, at the same time, that He was “with God” thereby indicating that Jesus is a distinct Person from God the Father.

In John 16:13-15 we see that although there is a close unity between them all, the Holy Spirit is also distinct from the Father and the Son.

The fact that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons means, in other words, that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Jesus is God, but He is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, but He is not the Son or the Father. They are different Persons, not three different ways of looking at God.

Jesus regularly prayed to the Father. If the Son and the Father are not distinct persons, when Jesus prayed, he would have simply been talking to himself. But the fact is, that while the Father and Son are God, they are two separate persons. Thus, when Jesus prayed to the Father it is further evidence that he and the Father not the same person.

Sometimes the Personhood of the Father and Son is appreciated, but the Personhood of the Holy Spirit is neglected. Sometimes the Spirit is treated more like a “force” than a Person. But the Holy Spirit is not an it, but a He (see John 14:26; 16:7-15; Acts 8:16). The fact that the Holy Spirit is a Person, not an impersonal force (like gravity), is also shown by the fact that He speaks (Hebrews 3:7), reasons (Acts 15:28), thinks and understands (1 Corinthians 2:10-11), wills (1 Corinthians 12:11), feels (Ephesians 4:30), and gives personal fellowship (2 Corinthians 13:14).

While the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are separate from each other, they remain equal to one another. Paul says in Philippians 2:6 says “Christ Jesus, though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.” Clearly, Christ Jesus is equal to God the Father and so is the Holy Spirit. They are equal in power, love, mercy, justice, holiness, knowledge, and all other qualities.

As equals, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist together as one God. Each one is not one third God, which when added together equals the fullness of God.

Each one is fully God. For example, it says of Christ that “in Him all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).

We should not think of God as like a “pie” cut into three pieces, each piece representing a Person. This would make each Person less than fully God and thus not God at all. Each Person is the whole pie. Each Person in and of Himself is fully God.

This is what makes the doctrine of the Trinity so hard to comprehend, it goes against everything we’ve ever been taught. All of us learned very early on that one plus one plus one equals three. But in the arithmetic of the Trinity, one plus one plus one equals one which leads us back to the beginning and the oneness of God.

Let us quickly review what we have seen.

1. The Trinity is not belief in three gods. There is only one God, and we must never let go of this.
2. This one God exists as three Persons.
3. The three Persons are not each part of God, but are each fully God and equally God
4. God is not one person who took three different roles. That is the heresy of modalism. The Father did not become the Son and then the Holy Spirit. Instead, there have always been and always will be three distinct persons in the Godhead.

So what does all of us mean to us? Why would I choose to talk about such a heavy, hard to understand topic? I am sure that many Christians think this doctrine is only for people who don’t have better things to do with their time but debate unsolvable questions. Let me mention five ways I think this doctrine is relevant to our lives.

1. The Trinity helps us answer the question, "What was God doing before He created the universe?"

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that before the world began, God had fellowship within His own being. That's why the Bible tells us that the Father loves the Son (John 17:24). From everlasting to everlasting God the Father, God

the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have forever communicated and loved each other.

This is where the human desire for intimacy and communication comes from. We were made to communicate. We were made to be in fellowship with others. That design is part of the image of God within each of us.

It also teaches us that God is never "lonely." He didn't create us because he "needed" us. God could have existed forever without us. That he made us at all is a statement of his great love and the wisdom of his plan.

2. The Trinity teaches us that God is beyond all human comprehension and therefore worthy of our worship.

After all, if we could explain God, God wouldn't be God therefore not worthy of worship. If you feel baffled by the Trinity, join the crowd. History's greatest minds have stood in amazement before a God so great that he cannot be contained by our puny explanations. However, to understand more fully what God is like is a way of honoring God. Moreover, we should allow the fact that God is triune to deepen our worship. We exist to worship God. And God seeks people to worship Him in "spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Therefore, we must always endeavor to deepen our worship of God — in truth as well as in spirit.

3. The Trinity has a very significant application to prayer. The general pattern of prayer which the church has practiced for ages is to pray to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Our fellowship with God should be enhanced by consciously knowing that we are relating to a tri-personal God!

4. The Trinity exalts the Son and the Spirit.

We all know that God the Father is to be worshiped. But what about Jesus Christ? If he is God, should we not also worship him? The answer is of course yes. That truth leads us back to the Trinity. He is not merely the Son of God but also God the Son. The same thing may be said about the Holy Spirit. He is not just a "force" but a Divine Person. The Third Person of the Trinity is not an "influence" or some vague power.

Since all Three Persons of the Trinity are equally God, we may pray to any member of the Trinity. We regularly sing songs to Jesus and the Holy Spirit which are prayers in themselves. So if we sing our prayers, why shouldn't we speak our prayers?

As I said the most commonly practiced pattern for prayer is that we pray to the Father. But let us not think that the Father is jealous if we direct our prayers to the Son or the Spirit, according to our needs at the moment.

#### 5. The Trinity helps us understand the Cross.

As Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is from all eternity a self-giving God who pours himself out for us. Indeed, this is not only something the three Persons of the Trinity do; this is who the triune God eternally is. As TF Torrance writes, *The atoning act perfected in the cross of Jesus Christ is grounded in the very being of the eternal God, that is, in the eternal being of the Holy Trinity* (The Mediation of Christ, 113).

The cross is the ultimate example of God's self-giving love for us. As Paul said in Romans 5:8 "God shows His great love for us in this way, Christ died for us while we were still sinners. The essence of love is the willingness to suffer for another. Think about the people you are willing to suffer for, I can almost guarantee that the people you think of first are the people you love the most.

Christ was willing to suffer upon the cross for you and me because God is love. The love which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally have for one another overflows into love for us. Jesus said in John 15:13 "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

We'll be exploring the meaning of the cross in much more detail at a later session, but for now let us be content with the knowledge that as the Trinity loves one another, so we are loved.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most difficult things to understand about Christian beliefs. Of this there can be no doubt, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—but there is only one God. Let us never lose our grasp on that.