

The Holy Trinity

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Introduction

The Trinity is one of most of the important doctrines of Christianity, or is the most doctrine. But the Trinity has fallen on hard times. If and when there has been any discussion it is been mainly a topic of apologetics rather than seen as a central concern to the body of Christ.

If you pick up any Systematic Theology book you will see that the chapter on the Trinity is listed along with the other attributes of God under Theology proper. The reason for this is that modern systematic theology is based on the works of a group of men from the 11th and 12th century, known as the schoolman or scholastics. This was the start of Universities. The modern framework of theology is based on the work of these men, and in particular that of Thomas Aquinas. The way he structured his work has become the way that most theologians since have structured their works, along with all the weaknesses that god with it. This approach has tended to minimise the Trinity and ignored the person of the Father. The result of this has minimised the Trinity in the life of ordinary Christians.

Someone has said that modern Christians have become practical modalists. The average Christian does not read the Bible seeing the rich picture of the Trinity that is displayed there. Christianity has become bland and boring. Understanding the Trinity is like going from a black and white photo to a colour.

We will consider some of this richness in the last section of this study.

What is the trinity?

Matt 28: ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, . . . “

Before Jesus ascends he tells his Apostles, to baptise in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son and the Spirit (three). Here we have the Trinity, one being and 3 persons. 3 persons in 1 being. To baptise in the name of is a way of identification with. So we, when we are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are identified with the God who is the 3 persons.

At Jesus's baptism we have another clear example of the Trinity.

Mark 1: ⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The Father speaks from heaven about the Son who has just been baptised and sends the Spirit to dwell in/with him. If God simply appears like 3 persons when he is in effect only one then this event is a problematic one. The 3 members act at the same time in unison.

The church still believed in Jewish monotheism. Up until the coming of Jesus monotheism was considered of the form; single being, single person. The form of monotheism deepens with Jesus, but it is still 1 God, but now revealed to be 3 persons.

How do we define God?

There is one unique being, God, who is 3 persons, who are coequal and coeternal with each other. God has revealed himself to be Father, Son and Spirit, eternally, within the being of God.

Within the trinity each person has a unique relationship to the other 2. There can be only 1 Father, there can be only one Son and there can be only 1 Spirit.

1 being, 3 persons: 3 Persons, 1 being

The Apostles taught that there is only one God. But they came to the belief that the one God was 3 persons. They believe in a new God but that with the fuller revelation of God as 3 persons their understanding has grown from what is revealed in the Old Testament.

How we frame this point is important, we do not say that there is 1 being and 3 beings, nor is there a case of 1 person who is three persons. These are a contradiction and a contradiction cannot be true by definition. So therefore there is 1 unique being, God, who is 3 persons, Father, Son and Spirit. Any attempt to illustrate this from creation will always lead to either the heresy of Modalism or tri-theism. For example, water. Water can exist as gas, liquid or solid. But the problem is that it cannot exist as each at the same time. Water then becomes a picture of modalism not the trinity. On the other side the 3 leaf clover. It is a leaf that has 3 sub leaves. This analogy points not to the trinity but to Tri-theism.

The 3 persons are Homoousios (Same)

Homoousios or Homoiousios are the 2 words that were debated at Nicaea. One means same and the other means similar. The single letter 'i' becomes very important.

“The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are identical in being. Each person is the whole God. The 3 together are not more God than any one of them considered on their own”

There are 3 issues that Christians have struggle with are: Emphasising the one being of God so that the 3 persons are minimised. This results into a form of modalism. The other emphasising the 3

persons against the 1 being so that they appear to operate as individuals. This results into a form of Tri-theism.

Reducing the Trinity to one of the attributes of God, such as omniscience, or omnipotence has resulted in a colourless or bland Christianity as the Trinity is ignored by the ordinary Christians in the church pew.

Indivisible Essence, Inseparable Operations

If God is one being who is 3 persons then you cannot divide up God into parts. This part here is the Holy Spirit, this part over here is the Son and that part over there is the Father. You can't divide up God into parts like this.

Therefore what one member of the trinity is doing involves all 3 members of the Trinity. Creation was the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit at work. Our salvation is a work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

“Augustine affirmed that “just as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably.” Yet as the three are eternally distinct, each work is specifically attributed – or appropriated – to one of them.”

The 3 persons are irreducible

The 3 persons cannot be reduced to anything smaller. The 3 are God but each is not the other. This fact can be seen in the incarnation, it is only the Son who took on human flesh not the Father nor the Spirit. It is the Father who sends the Son and then sends the Spirit. It is the Spirit who indwells us.

Could any any member of the Trinity have become incarnate but it always had to be the Son and could never be the Father or the Spirit. It is more appropriate for the Son. But not the Father, it is more appropriate for the Spirit to come and indwell Christians because of who he is. But this is not appropriate for the Father and the Son.

But their works are inseparable, the 3 work together because they are inseparable in being.

There is an order (Taxis) within the Trinity

Even though each person is equal, and each has all the attributes of deity, they are the one being God. All 3 are therefore equal in everything.

But there is an order between the members. Not a hierarchy or rank but an appropriate disposition. We see this in the order that is often given, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in scripture. More fully, from the Father, by the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

Ever wonder why John could say in 1 John 4 God is love? This only makes any kind of sense if there is love being expressed between the members of the Trinity. A single being and single person God cannot be love.

Why is it so important?

Our very salvation rests on the fact that God is Trinity. The coming of the Son and the Spirit is bundled together with the acts of God's salvation. Let us look at the way that the Trinity is revealed.

The Way that the Trinity is revealed

B B Warfield said that the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament. The Trinity is not revealed in the New Testament. Any questions? Ok that is not exactly what he said. But he raised some very important points about how God has revealed himself. Let's break it down before we see how God did reveal himself as Trinity.

The Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament

When we look into the Old Testament there is no clear revelation of the Trinity given to us. There is nowhere, anywhere, that God says to a prophet, "Let me tell you about my nature, there is 3 of me."

But God must be consistent with himself. So we see aspects of the Father, the Son and the Spirit but there is nowhere a prophet says, "Sit down let me tell you about threeness of God."

"The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus, the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged." B B Warfield quoted in "The Trinity in the Old Testament," The Master Seminary Journal. 33 – 1.

We see hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament but these are at best confusing. We see the Trinity in the Old Testament here and there, but we see it only because the Son, has pointed it out to us later. We see the Trinity after it has been pointed out to us by the Son who came at a specific time to reveal God as Trinity. We see the trinity by looking back at the Old Testament from the perspective of having had the Trinity already revealed to us. We see it now because Jesus pointed these references out to his disciples saying, "That passage is talking about me."

"It is a plain matter of fact that none who have depended on the revelation embodied in the Old Testament alone have ever attained to the doctrine of the Trinity." B B Warfield quoted in "The Trinity in the Old Testament," The Master Seminary Journal. 33 – 1.

The Trinity is not revealed in the New Testament.

Similar to the Old Testament we have nowhere in the New Testament where one of the Apostles writes to one of the churches, "I write these words to you to make it clear that there is a threeness to the 1 God. Let me explain."

In the New Testament the writers speak about the Trinity, yes, and they lay the foundation for what the church fathers and later generations would build the doctrine on. For us, this is God revealing himself as Trinity. But we miss a very significant development if we don't recognise how God did revealed this to this world.

The New Testament looks back to the revelation. The way that the writers of the Old Testament looked forward it. We may think that the New Testament reveals the Trinity, and in a sense it does do that for us.

The Trinity is revealed in the coming of the Son and the Spirit. In the events of history. God reveals that he is Trinity in the Father sending his Son to be with us, and then sending the Spirit to be in us. Jesus's incarnation and then the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost are how God revealed himself to be Trinity.

The revelation of the Trinity is bundled with our Salvation

What this then means is that the revelation of God as Trinity is tied to our salvation. These two are bundled together as a package deal. God's revelation of himself as Trinity happens through our salvation.

The mission of the Son was to save us and to reveal the Father. Why did Jesus come? Jesus's revelation of God as Father, Son and Spirit is part and parcel of his coming to save us. The life and death of Jesus are means by which God saves us but they are also the means by which Jesus reveals the Father. God has bundled them together in a way that you do not get one without the other.

The mission of the Spirit is to reveal the Son and unite us to the Father. It was not enough simply for Jesus to come and die for us. Our salvation somehow requires that we are united to God. We are adopted into God's Father, Jesus's Father becomes our Father. We are united into Jesus's Sonship. This is only possible through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of God as Trinity is bundled together with God's works of Salvation which happens with the coming of the Son and the Spirit.

Our Salvation reveals who God is

"The eternal Trinity is truly present in the Gospel. This changes everything about our salvation, our knowledge of God, and our experiences of God, because it takes us straight to the centre of God's revealed ways. This is how God gives himself to us: by the Father giving the son and the Spirit. This is how God is with us; in Christ and the Spirit of Christ. This is how we know God: as he truly is, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The whole field of Christian life and thought is thus open for biblical, Trinitarian exploration. But there is also a relatively minor point that is worth noting, and it has to do with where our minds go when we think of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is easy to fall into the habit of thinking that the Trinity points to some set of facts about God which, while true, have nothing to do with us. . . . When we talk about Jesus, sent by the Father to work in the Spirit we should know that we are talking about the Trinity. . . . The whole point is that presence of the Son and the Spirit themselves, sent by the Father into the economy of Salvation, is the Trinity. These persons in the Gospel story are not what the Trinity is like – they are the Trinity." The Deep things of God, Fred Sanders.

I think Fred Sanders is wrong with his comment that it is relatively minor point that we think of the Trinity is simply a set of facts about God. I believe that this distorts the Gospel at best and at worst it reduces it. When someone opens the door to understanding the Trinity in the Gospel it enriches their lives, motivates them to a deeper Christian ministry, increases commitments and results in a growth towards true Christ-likeness.

Some important passages?

Let us now look at some important passages to see what we have may have missed, or to learn again to see Trinity in the Gospel

John 3: 16

"¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

In this verse that we know so well we have the Father and the Son joint in mission. The wider context also includes the Spirit.

The Father. The correct interpretation of this verse sees that the subject of this sentence is God the Father. But it is in relationship to the Son so we should understand this verse as "For God the Father so loved the World . . ." The person that John is talking about in this verse is not the Son but it is the Father.

The Father so loves the world that it is he who sends the Son. The Son does not come on his own volition but comes as directed by the Father. But it tells us of the intensity of this Love.

In the Greek the word for “one and only” is *monogenēs* and does not simply mean unique as some translations have it but a better and older translation is “only begotten” but I cannot think of a better phrases. It does mean one of a kind but is stronger than unique.

The early church fathers talked about procession, the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father. But they proceed from the Father in different ways

John 5: 16 - 30

*“¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. **For** whatever the Father^[a] does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ **For** the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ **For** as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. ²² **For** the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”*

In this passage Jesus talks about his relationship with the Father. If you are not careful in reading this passage it could be easy to take away from it that Jesus is declaring himself to be another God alongside the Jewish God of the Old Testament.

With the first use of the word ‘for’ Jesus frames it with the context that they know well, a Jewish family. A boy would learn the trade from his father and a girl would learn from her mother. As a boy grows the father would teach him the skills that he would need as an adult. A son does as his father does. Joseph was a carpenter so Jesus learned to be a carpenter and was known as the carpenter’s son. But Jesus here claims that this is the type of relationship that he has with God the Father. It is not one of independence but of dependence. Jesus is not claiming to be another God or even as a competing God. Jesus is claiming equality with the Father, yes, but not independence from. “The Son can do nothing of his own accord.” Or better of his initiative.

The second ‘for’ expresses why this is so. It is because the Father loves the Son and therefore shows him everything. The relationship between the Father and the Son is one of love. The Father so loves the Son that he shares everything he is and everything he does with the Son. The Son so loves the Father that he is in himself and through everything he does seeking to please his Father.

Because this is a perfect reciprocal relationship the Son can then by the nature of his perfect obedience to his Father, reveal the Father to the world. What D A Carson calls “narrating the Father.

This is why Jesus can say later on to a question, “Show us the Father”

“⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

“⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^[a] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

“⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

“⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

“The very obedience and dependence that characterize Jesus’s utter subordination to the Father are themselves so perfect that all Jesus does is what the Father wills and does, so it is nothing less than a revelation of God. Small wonder that Jesus will later declare, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” D A Carson in ‘The Gospel according to John’ page 252.

This self-disclosure depends primary not on God’s love for us, but on the internal, Trinitarian love between the Father and the Son. Jesus goes to the cross ultimately not because he loves us but because he loves his father. And in doing so he reveals the glory of God to the world.

The third ‘for’ has to with a prerogative that in the Old Testament is seen to belonging to God and only God. That is the giving of life. To raise the dead and give live means the same thing here. Only God has this right and ability, but here we see that the Father shares this with the Son. Both the Father and the Son have the right to raise the dead and give life. But the Son never acts in independence of the Father and as we have already said, seeks to please the Father in all that he does.

The final ‘for’ declares that the Father has left all judgement to the son, which goes along with the previous ‘for.’ The Son’s judgements will always be in line with the judgements of the Father so the Father can leave all judgement with the Son. At the end of time Jesus is one who will judge the living and the dead. God is the ultimate judge before we will all have to stand and give an account but it will be Jesus who specifically does this. Another claim to deity here is being made.

But it is important to note why. The Father seeks that all will honour the Son in the same way that he is honoured. In the New Testament it is a case that between the Father and the Son, they each seek the glory and the honour of the other, both that it is seen and that it is given.

Matthew 27: 45 – 46

“⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli,^[a] lema sabachthani?” (Which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)”

Just as in Jesus day, on this day, the day of the crucifixion, people didn’t understand what Jesus was meaning by what he said, so it seems that today there are those who still do not understand what he means by what he says.

There are those who take it mean that Jesus is rejected by the Father. That the Father totally abandoned his Son. That somehow the Trinity is broken. That God the Father became hostile towards his Son.

But the simplest explanation is the easiest. The Father took no action when the soldiers came and arrested his Son. The Father did not send legions of angels to release his Son when he was tortured and whipped. The Father did not use his omnipotence to destroy the world that was nailing his Son to the wooden beam. Why? Our Salvation required this.

What the Father did do was to accept the sacrifice that his Son offered him on our behalf. The Father fulfilled his plan for our redemption through the Son’s death. The Father revealed his greater glory, his love, his grace, his mercy by what the Son did on the cross. The Father tore the curtain between the holy place and the holy of holies a part to let us into his presence and he adopted us into his family. This is what Jesus accomplished on the cross which could have never happened if the Father had taken action when his Son was crucified.

Romans 8: 14 – 17, Ephesians 1: 3 – 6, Gal 4: 1 – 7

Romans 8: *“¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.^[a] And by him we cry, “Abba,^[b] Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”*

Ephesians 1: *“³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he^[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship^[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will . . .”*

Galatians 4: *“⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.^[b] ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba,^[c] Father.” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”*

The 3 passages ties together the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit in our adoption. J I Packer calls Adoption the highest privilege that the Gospel has to offer, higher than even justification.

“Adoption is a central Biblical description of how God saves. It emphasizes the quality of the new relationship that God brings us into, a relationship of having been made into his children.” Fred Sanders.

The Father decided that he would adopt us into his family. Fatherhood and Sonship have always, eternally, been a relationship internal to the Trinity. The first person of the Trinity has always been a Father (not in the same way that human fathers are). The Father has adopted us and extended this internal to the Trinity relationship to now include us. It is a privilege that we can call the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ our Father. “In explicitly Trinitarian terms, this means that God brings us into the relationship of sonship that has always been part of his divine life.” Fred Sanders

The Spirit indwells us to declare our sonship to the Father. “The Spirit is the one who baptizes us into Christ, forms us into sons based on his sonship, and even takes up residence within us as the principle of sonship that enables us to call on God as Father.” Fred Sanders

The Son paid the price and laid the foundation for our adoption. All of what the Son was doing was to enable this to happen. Justification serves adoption, adoption is built on justification and is the highest blessing of salvation. “When we become sons of God, we are joined to the sonship of the incarnate Son, which is turn the human enactment of the eternal sonship of the second person of the trinity. Sonship was always within God, and it came to be on earth as it is in heaven, in the person of the incarnate Christy.” Fred Sanders.

Our sonship mirrors his, it is not simply just a set of words that are used. His sonship is tied to the intra-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son. “To be the Son of this Father, to address and relate to him as Abba implies a willingness for his will to the extreme extent of drinking the cup of immeasurable suffering and making the sacrifice of life itself. . . . We must immediately add that the Father whose right to make such a demand is recognised and accepted by his Son in Gethsemane is no stern lawgiver threatening vengeance, and no inevitable fate before whom there is no alternative but to give way. . . The Father whom Jesus addresses in the garden is the one that he has known all his life and found to be bountiful in provision, reliable in his promises and utterly faithful in his love. He can obey the will that sends him to the cross, with hope and expectation

because it is the will of Abba whose love has been so proved that it can now be trusted so fully by being obeyed so completely. . . When in the Spirit we dare to cry Abba! after Jesus, the one on whom we call is the God of Gethsemane who can ask for anything including ourselves because he has given everything including himself.” The forgotten Father, Thomas Smail.

For Further Reading

Delighting in the Trinity, Tim Chester, The Good Book Company.

Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and why it matter, Thomas H McCall, IVP Academic

The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything, Fred Sanders, Crossway Books

Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel, Andreas J Kostenberger & Scott Swain, IVP, Apollos