

Introduction...

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked by a student during a seminar in the United States, "Dr. Barth, what is the most profound thing you have ever learned in your study of theology?" After a brief pause Barth replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." The room filled with muffled laughter at this simplistic answer, but the giggles soon died to silence when the class realized Barth was serious.

The study of Biblical theology should lead us to two vitally important conclusions:

1. That in the simplest Biblical truth there lies a depth and beauty that can capture our minds for a lifetime.
2. That in all our complex theological pursuits, we never really rise above the level of a child in our understanding of the depth and wealth of God's true nature.¹

John Calvin said that God is so beyond us that He has to speak to us in a form of Divine baby-talk just so we can understand the words that come from His mouth. There are aspects of God's being and character that we cannot truly begin to grasp and today's topic ranks right up at the top of that list.

Seven weeks ago we began a study on the doctrine of God (Theology Proper) where we have sought to gain a better understanding of the God we worship, the God who created us, the God who loves us and redeemed us from our sin, the God who revealed Himself to us in His Word. We have looked at the being of God, the Character of God, the Works of God; but if we were to end our study without looking at this next subject we would have to conclude that we don't really understand God at all.

The final aspect of our study is going to center on the fact that God has always existed as one God and yet at the same time He exists as three distinct persons. The theological term that describes this is Trinity and this doctrine is one of the most unique and important in all of Christian theology. In fact, Christianity rests on this mysterious doctrine of the three-in-oneness of God and because it is so mysterious, there are many who think we should just get on without it and leave it to the theologians to sort out.

But here's the thing, if we are going to truly know, love, and worship God, then we are going to have to seek to understand this. We need to know what He is like? We are going to have to try to make sense of what we read about Him in the Scriptures. We are going to need to try and understand why His three-in-oneness is important for us.

Transition...

So this morning I want us to work through these three questions: 1. **Where** is the doctrine of the Trinity found in the Bible? 2. **What** does the doctrine of the Trinity teach us? 3. **Why** does this matter?

Sermon Focus...**I. Where is the doctrine of the Trinity found in the Bible?**

¹ R.C. Sproul, *100 Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*. (Pg. 31)

Trinity is a theological term that means “tri-unity” or “three-in-one-ness.” It is a term that was originally used by the early church father Tertullian and while the word **Trinity** is never found in the Bible the term is used to try and summarize the Biblical teaching that God is three persons and yet one God. The word **Trinity** is used as a way to try and hold together two ideas about God that we find in Scripture: His Unity and His diversity.

Over the years, Christians have tried to simplify this doctrine by using mathematical equations or some form of metaphor, but many of those just create more problems. So instead, I want to look at this doctrine of the Trinity in five assertions: **(1) God is one; (2) God is three; (3) the three persons are each fully God; (4) each of the persons is distinct from the others; and (5) the three persons are related eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** We will look at each of these assertions in turn.²

God is One -

The Bible is abundantly clear that there is only one God.

Deut 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

In the Ten Commandments we read this,

Exod 20:2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

This is very important for us to understand. There is only one God. There is only one being that is worthy of our worship. There are not many gods as other religious groups might claim. Our God is one **and yet** at the same time we have to recognize that our God has revealed himself to exist in some form of a plurality and we can see evidence of this all the way back in the language of the creation account in **Genesis 1**.

Gen 1:26 Then God said, “**Let us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness...”²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Then after Adam and Eve sinned we read this in **Gen 3:22**, “Behold, the man has become like **one of us** in knowing good and evil.”

Now, what is going on here? As we read these passage we understand that in some way God is engaged in a dialogue with another person and it’s not an angel that He is talking to because man wasn’t made in the image of an angel. Man was made in the image of God. The best explanation is that God was in counsel with Himself and within the Godhead more than one person exists. There is a divine plurality.

Within this paradigm we see that there is a unity of purpose, a unity of essence but a diversity of persons, but at this point in Scripture it is not yet clear how we should understand this diversity. At this point we have no idea how many persons and we don’t have enough to develop a **Trinitarian** theology. That takes shape most clearly in the NT where each person of the godhead is revealed more fully and affirmed as full deity.

² Frame, J. M. (2006). [*Salvation belongs to the Lord: an introduction to systematic theology*](#) (p. 30). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

So we start off with an understanding that God is One, united in essence and purpose. But now let's look at the fact that God is Three -

In the New Testament, it is a settled doctrine that three persons exist within the godhead; the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. This became clear to the NT authors because in their lifetime they saw the Son and the Holy Spirit come into the world and they recognized them as full deity.

Jesus was introduced to the NT through a long genealogy that opened the book of Matthew. He is the focal point of the long list of names but that list includes both men and women and it stretched all the way back to Abraham. The list is structured in three sections: from Abraham to David, then David to Exile in Babylon, then Exile to Jesus who was born of Mary.

Matthew then tells us the story of how Mary came to be pregnant with Jesus. He wasn't conceived in normal fashion; He was conceived ***by the Holy Spirit***. We have never read anything quite like this in the Bible. We have seen prophecies about a great king who was to be born of a virgin but this is a little more than we might have expected.

Now, it won't do to simply dismiss the biblical authors as barbaric people who did not understand how babies came to be, even then the people knew that this didn't make ***natural*** sense. But a miracle by definition is a ***super-natural*** occurrence when God disorders the natural order of things.

So as Jesus enters into the world we know that He is unique and in some mysterious way we know that the ***Spirit of God*** is involved in His life. But when we turn the page and begin to read in **Matthew 3** we see something take shape that had been a mystery up to that point.

Matthew 3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ 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; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Now, before you dismiss this account as some spiritual experience rather than an actual experience let me point out that this same account can be read in **Mark 1:9-11 and Luke 3:21-22**. We see the same story in John's gospel but there we read it as the testimony of what John the Baptist saw,

John 1:32 John bore witness saying: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Now on this day John the Baptist was the one doing the baptizing, Jesus was the one in the water, there was a crowd of people present; some receiving baptism and some simply observing John's ministry. But on this day there were two others present: God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

Each of the persons is distinct from the others -

Here in this one moment of time we have three members of the Trinity performing three distinct activities. God the Father is speaking from Heaven; God the Son is being baptized and receiving the loving support of His Father; and God the Holy Spirit is descending from heaven to rest upon and give strength to Jesus for the ministry that lies ahead.

J. C. Ryle commented on this passage in this way,

We may regard this as a public announcement that the work of Christ was the result of the eternal counsels of all the three persons of the blessed Trinity. It was the whole Trinity, which at the beginning of creation said, 'Let us make man;' it was the whole Trinity again, which at the beginning of the gospel seemed to say, 'Let us save man.'

The three persons are each fully God -

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that they now have a public ministry to get on with and it is to, "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." One God but three distinct persons is the Trinitarian formula that flows through the rest of the New Testament.

Our Biblical understanding of the Spirit of God stretches back to the very beginning of the OT when we read of God's Spirit taking part in creation. We also read about the Spirit of God coming to rest upon people. The Priest were said to be filled with the Spirit of God, the craftsmen who constructed the temple and carved the designs for the temple were filled with Spirit of God. When David was anointed as the next king of Israel we read that the Spirit of God rushed upon him and never left.

Some have suggested that these OT references to the Spirit of God are simply expressions of God's power, but in the NT things become more clear. Jesus taught the disciples that He was going to leave them but it was going to be OK because God was going to send another to comfort them. In fact, Jesus called Him the Comforter, the Holy Spirit of God, whom the Father would send to be with the disciples forever.

By the way, Jesus wasn't lying. The Holy Spirit did come on the day of Pentecost in **Acts 2** and the church recognized that the Holy Spirit was also fully God.

Acts 5:3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart ***to lie to the Holy Spirit*** and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land...Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? ***You have not lied to man but to God.***"

The church understood that the Father was God, that Jesus was God and the Holy Spirit was also God. One unified God existing as three distinct persons.

These three persons are related eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

II. What does the doctrine of the Trinity teach us?

The Doctrine of the Trinity has been defined in many ways but each definition aims to make some things clear about God while also not denying other things about God. Throughout church history this doctrine has been very hotly debated and the earliest statements of Christian theology aimed to make the doctrine of the Trinity very clear.

The Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
 he descended to the dead.
 On the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,
 he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
 and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting. Amen.³

Here in this early form of a Christian statement of faith we identify an unmistakably Trinitarian structure.

The church over the years has also used symbols to try and capture the essence of this doctrine. This symbol seeks to summarize the Trinitarian formula by highlighting seven statements: (1) There is only one God. (2) The Father is God. (3) The Son is God. (4) The Holy Spirit is God (5) The Father is not the Son (6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit (7) The Holy Spirit is not the Father.



Now why do we need all of this complex language and these Trinitarian formulas and these very precise symbols? Because, over the years there have been some really dangerous heresies that have come to light on this doctrine and some are still around today.

Modalism claims that there is one person who appears to us in three different forms (modes). For example, modalism says that God appeared as the Father in the OT. Then in the NT the same person is said to have appeared as the Son, and then after Pentecost the same person is said to be active in the church as the Spirit. IOW, God was the Father, then He became the Son, and finally He became the Spirit. But this heresy simply doesn't line up with what we see in Scripture especially at Jesus' baptism or what we here in Jesus' teaching. Many Pentecostal groups adopt a form of this heresy.

Arianism is another heresy that denies the full deity of Jesus by teaching that Jesus is part of the created order.

³ <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/apostles-creed>

Tritheism is a view held by Mormons and it also denies the doctrine of the Trinity by teaching that there are three separate beings and therefore we have three separate Gods.

None of these are consistent with what the Bible teaches. The Bible nowhere teaches that the Father became the Son and then the Son became the Spirit. The Bible nowhere teaches that Jesus is less than God in the flesh. The Bible nowhere teaches that we are to worship three separate Gods known as the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

But these unorthodox views have pushed the church to be very precise about what we do believe the Bible teaches on the Trinity. Listen to another early Christian theological statement and how precisely it was crafted.

The Athanasian Creed:

Now this is the catholic faith:

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.⁴

Kevin DeYoung commenting on this statement wrote:

The two key words here are “essence” and “persons.” When you read “essence,” think “Godness.” All three persons of the Trinity share the same “Godness.” One is not more God than the other. None is more essentially divine than the rest. When you read “persons,” think “a particular individual distinct from the others.”⁵

We use these terms in this way because we are trying to find a way to express the relationship of three beings who are fully and equally God, but not three separate Gods. And we have to use all these words and all these symbols because our finite minds can’t accurately conceive the being of our infinite God. We are like newborns trying to baby-talk and babble our way through an explanation of her parent.

Conclusion...

III. Why Does the Trinity matter?

1. It matters because it is in the Bible. We may not fully understand it, and the Lord knows we don’t, but He revealed this to us because He wants us to know Him. He wants us to know that He is Incomprehensible. He wants us to know that He is not like us and He is not like the pagan gods created in the imagination of man’s mind. He is our triune creator and redeemer and He wants us to know Him in this way.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot*. (pg. 50)

2. It matters because we need to know the God we worship. We need to know that our God exists as three-in-one. This impacts our songs, it impacts our prayers, it impacts our preaching, it shapes our liturgy, and it reveals the true nature of the God who created us and redeemed us. We worship the Father and give Him the praise He is due. We worship the Son and glorify Him for His saving sacrifice. We worship in the Spirit and sing of how He caused us to be born again. We worship our blessed three-in-one.

3. It matters for evangelism.

“The two main rivals to a Christian worldview are Islam and Postmodernism. Islam emphasized unity – unity of language, culture and expression – but it allows for almost no diversity. Postmodernism emphasizes diversity – diversity of opinions, beliefs and background – but there is no overarching reality that holds it together.

But Christianity, with the Triune God at its core, allows for diversity and unity. Since God exists as three persons who share the same essence, then it is possible for creation to exhibit stunning variety and individuality while still being bound together in unity.

4. It matters for our relationships. Our God exists in a perfect state of eternal relationship with Himself. He is united in love, in purpose, in worth, in essence but within that relationship there is a diversity of responsibility. All three persons of the Trinity are active within the works of God but they execute different roles. The Father planned creation, the Son executed creation and the Spirit gave life to all created things. The Father ordained redemption, the Son accomplished redemption and the Spirit applies that redemption in the hearts of God’s people.

There are no hurt feelings within the Godhead, no grandstanding, or pouting because One gets more attention than another. God is fully united in a relationship of love that flows into our hearts and is to be lived out in our lives. God made us to enjoy community where there is unity despite diversity. Our God who exists as a community saves us into community and the love that we show to one another is a love that is to change the world.

5. It matters for the sake of the gospel. It was love that motivated the Father to send Jesus (**John 3:16**). It was love that motivated Jesus to lay down His life for His friends (**John 15:13**). It is love that the Holy Spirit plants deep in our hearts that makes us cry out, “Abba! Father! (**Gal 4:7**)”

When you come to faith in Christ, you are not simply becoming Jesus’ friend, as awesome as that is, but you are being welcomed into Trinitarian love that exists from everlasting to everlasting.