

“The Trinity”

The late Cardinal Cushing once told of a time when he was a parish priest. He was summoned to a store to give the last rites to a man who had collapsed. Cardinal Cushing knelt by the man and asked, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” He said the man roused a little, opened one eye, looked at the people standing around, and said, “Here I am dying, and he asks me a riddle!”

When we talk about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit we are talking about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. And to be honest, even after we’ve tried to understand and explain it, it may still seem like a riddle to us!

Did you know that today is “Trinity Sunday” on the church calendar? An English Methodist clergyman, David Head, wrote several little books on prayer. He has a knack of writing honest, sometimes humorous, prayers that express what we may *think*, but would probably never verbalize in our prayers. In his book *Stammerer’s Tongue*, he lists prayers for all occasions. One is for Trinity Sunday: “Lord, this doctrine (of the Trinity) is too much for me, and apparently too much for this morning’s preacher. The sermon was about kindness to animals.”

Well, today is Trinity Sunday, and *I am* going to preach on the Trinity! Having said this, I realize that this may not have you sitting on the edge of your seat, heart beating with huge anticipation for what I’m going to say! This is kind of a doctrinal sermon. A pastor of mine once said that preaching sermons on doctrine is a good way to put people to sleep! This is especially in our current culture, where those outside the church *and* many inside the church aren’t caught up in questions about Christian doctrine as much as they’re asking, “Will this Christianity stuff work for me?”

But what we believe about God, and the kind of God we believe in, really is important! So, what does the doctrine of the Trinity tell us about God? We sing the classic hymn, “Holy, holy, holy ...” and that hymn includes these words, “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” Each is a separate divine Person: Father, Son, Holy Spirit – equal – yet *one God*.

Prior to the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist denominations in 1968, the EUB’s had their Confession of Faith, and the Methodists had 25 Articles of Religion. Both included a section describing the Trinity. The very first article in the EUB Confession of Faith was titled “God”, and included these words: “We believe in the one true, holy and living God ... we believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.” The first of the Articles of Religion of the former Methodist Church has to do with the Trinity: *Article I — Of Faith in the Holy Trinity* “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

So, God the Father is God; Jesus is God; the Holy Spirit is God. They are separate. But there’s only one God. No wonder people get confused and say it’s a riddle!

What is the Scriptural basis for this Christian doctrine? The clearest reference to the Trinity is in 1 John 5:7 in the King James Version: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” The only problem is: this was not part of the original letter of First John! It first appeared in a Latin version of the Scriptures about 300 years after John was already dead! And it didn’t appear in any *Greek* manuscripts of the New Testament until a thousand years later. It was probably a *marginal note* added by someone copying the text, then later incorporated right into the Scripture text. Other versions of the Bible omit it.

The word “Trinity” or a stated doctrine of the Trinity, is not found in the Bible! Yet very early in the history of the church the doctrine of the Trinity crystallized into a major doctrine of Christianity. Why? Because the idea of the Trinity grew out of New Testament teaching. For example, there are Scriptures that refer to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

2 Corinthians 13:14 says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” That’s a familiar benediction we still use in the church. Matthew 28:18 (Jesus’ parting words before His ascension): “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.” We are to make new disciples, and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. 1 Peter 1:2 tells us that Christians are “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ.” There are other Scriptures where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mentioned in close proximity, each as a distinct and separate entity of the Godhead.

Early in the history of the Church belief in the Trinity grew out of believers’ encounter with God as Father, as Son (Jesus), and as Spirit (Holy Spirit). The first Christians, because of their Jewish roots, already knew of God as *Father*. For instance, Isaiah 63:16 says, “But you, Lord, are *our Father*, our Redeemer from of old is your name.”

Then, these men and women were confronted with Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man – fully human. Yet His followers began to realize He was more than just a man. As they heard Him teach and preach with a decisive authority, and watched Him heal the sick and raise the dead, and then witnessed His resurrection three days after being crucified, they became convinced that this Jesus was *God* – truly and fully God. And they called Him the “Son of God.”

But even after Jesus physically left them and returned to the Father in heaven, He sent *His own Spirit* on them (as He promised). The Spirit of God had been present at times in the Old Testament, but now a Presence came and filled them on the day of Pentecost, and they knew that this Spirit – the Holy Spirit – was *God* working in and through them.

So the doctrine of the Trinity didn’t come about by an early Christian “brain trust” sitting around a table philosophizing about the nature of God! It wasn’t just an academic discussion on the mysterious essence and being of the Deity. They formed their belief in the Trinity as a result of their ***experience of God*** as heavenly Father, Jesus the Son, and the promised Holy Spirit.

Robert McAfee Brown, a noted Christian scholar, once wrote, “The doctrine of the Trinity is not an attempt by theologian to make things tough for the average Christian by introducing a celestial mathematics which says $3 = 1$. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to describe, as systematically as possible, the content of the *Christian experience* of God.” Someone has said, “The doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a description, not of God’s nature, but of (our human) awareness of God.” Protestant reformer John Calvin declared that the doctrine of the Trinity is “a description, not of what God is in Himself, but of what He is to us.” In other words, it's our way of trying to explain the reality of God's nature, which is, in itself, beyond human explanation.

We can use human analogies to try to explain the Trinity. For example, I am a father, a son, a husband. But there's only one me. That's fine, but it doesn't really explain the Trinity. We can use the illustration of water, H₂O. In liquid form, it's water. In solid form, it is ice. In gaseous form, it is steam. But all three forms don't exist at once, like they do with the Trinity. We can use analogies, but we can never fully comprehend nor explain the Trinity. Just as we can never fully explain nor comprehend God, who is the *mysterium tremendum, the infinite Other*. And that's OK!

The doctrine of the Trinity developed very early in the Church as a positive statement to safeguard against error and heresy. It helps to avoid certain pitfalls in our thinking and believing:

One extreme is to say there are 3 gods. No, Christianity is a monotheistic faith. The ancient Shema of the Hebrews stated: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The opposite extreme to avoid is Unitarianism, where God the Father is God, but Jesus and the Holy Spirit are lesser than God. No, Jesus and the Spirit are co-equals with the Father, each fully God.

Another error to avoid is to say that God is divided into 3 parts: the Father is one-third God, the Son is one-third God, and the Spirit is one-third God. No, each is 100% God!

The doctrine of the Trinity also avoids our saying that God played 3 different roles – like the Father became the Son when Jesus was born, and when Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Spirit, that God morphed into the Holy Spirit. Not so! For instance, Jesus, when He was on earth, prayed to the Father. The earthly Jesus was filled with the Spirit. God did not shift roles and take on different shapes at various times. God has eternally existed as Father, as Son, and as Spirit.

Well, are you still awake? Maybe you're thinking, “If nobody can really understand the doctrine of the Trinity, what good is it? Isn't all of this just a mental exercise?” Not really. Sound doctrine is important! Understanding the nature of God as best as we can is important. But even more important is this: ***that we experience God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.***

It's been said that the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, while not rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, felt rather cold and uneasy about it. Because for him, the reality of the Trinity is not just *thinking about it, but experiencing God* as our Father, and Jesus His Son, and God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Take the benediction found 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."

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you and I experience the grace of Christ in our life? Grace is a marvelous thing - that God shows us kindness and mercy in Christ we don't deserve and can never earn! It's through grace that we're saved. In so many ways, day in and day out, God showers us with His undeserved love and kindness when we go through the ups and downs of life here on earth.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, *and the love of God (the Father)*. Everybody longs for a father. Some of us have been blessed with a kind and loving father. Others of us never had that. But we all have a heavenly Father who cares for us, cherishes us, watches over us. When we put our trust in Christ, we are adopted into God's family. We become a beloved son or daughter of God, embraced by a divine love that will never end! We can experience the steady love of our heavenly Father.

The benediction continues, "*The fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*" The word "fellowship" in the New Testament (*koinonia*) is a magnificent word! It means a deep and intimate sharing. We've watered down the word "fellowship" today – we come to the church for "fellowship" - which often just means superficial talk, chit-chatting with one another. We can experience the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit within us, God's Spirit in us, to renew us, to guide us, to empower us for victorious Christian living!

"The grace of the Lord Jesus, and love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). See, in the end, the Trinity is not a *doctrine to be explained*, but rather *something to be experienced*.

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