



Sermon

The Trinity

16/6/2019

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Last week was Pentecost when we remembered the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on the Church. The effect of the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost are profound for our understanding of God. Why is that? Because we have evidence given to us that Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God as well as God the Father.

In the gospel passage we hear Jesus speaking of the Father, himself and the Holy Spirit acting together. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as revealing the things Jesus wants his followers to know. That sounds like the same relationship as between the Father and the Son - you may remember that Jesus said earlier that he only said the things that the Father told him. There is an interdependence between the persons of the Trinity.

In the passage from Romans the work of the Trinity is identified this time in the context of salvation: Jesus Christ makes peace for us with the Father so we have access to him. Then the Father's love is poured out on us through the Holy Spirit who is given to us. Here we see the Trinity mutually working for our salvation.

The early church quickly began to refer to Jesus and the Holy Spirit as God. Often using the title, "The Lord", for Jesus and God for the Father.

The Father is described as God

This evident from the first verse of Genesis where God created the heavens and the earth. Jesus calls God his Father in heaven.

John 5:18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him [Jesus]; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even **calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.**

John 6:27 Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him **God the Father** has placed his seal of approval.

The Son is described as God

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

John 20:28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Titus 2:13 ... we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of **our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ,** ...

The Holy Spirit is described as God

Acts 5:3-4 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that **you have lied to the Holy Spirit** and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? **You have not lied to men but to God.**"

1 Corinthians 2:10-11 God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

John 3:5-6 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Trinitarian References:

In additional some scriptures make reference to all three in the same sentence:

Matthew 28:19 Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit** ...

2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all.

1 Peter 1:2 ... according to the foreknowledge of **God the Father**, through the sanctifying work of the **Spirit**, for obedience to **Jesus Christ** ...

One God

However, the Bible also thunders that there is one only God.

Deuteronomy 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Isaiah 45:5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.

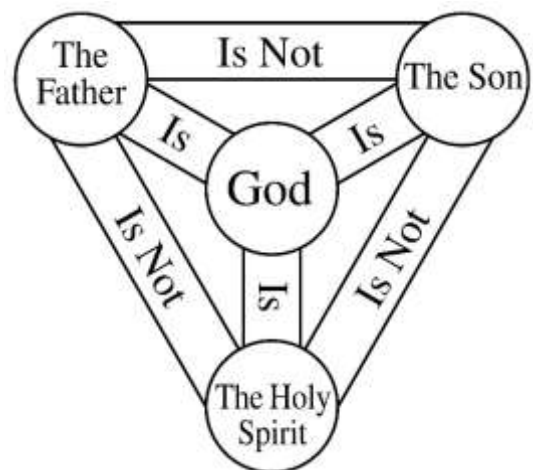
1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Yet within the Old Testament we see hints and partial revelations of the Trinity. An obvious example is the fact that the word for God is plural and God often speaks in the plural – yet this was not a ‘royal we’ – we know that idea did not exist in the culture of the time.

Even the *Shema* has a clue that Trinity is involved – it says literally: Yahweh, our God, Yahweh one. And the word for one, *echad*, is a unity rather than an absolute one. It is used of one bunch of grapes¹, husband and wife become one², "All the people answer Moses with *one* voice"³. Three words for God followed by the word one in this sense of unity – interesting!

There are many more references we could look at but time does not allow. What we can see it that these statements can be made with excellent scriptural support:

- The Father is God; Jesus Christ is God, the Holy Spirit is God
- Each is fully God.
- There is one God.
- Each is distinct from the others.



¹ Numbers 13:23

² Genesis 2:24

³ Exodus 24:3

The formulation of the Trinity is the attempt to describe an understanding which honours all of these without losing any of the truths revealed to us.

Illustrations

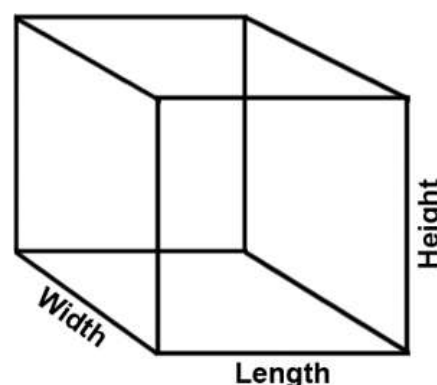
Once we have laid out the statements we find in Scripture as we try to understand how these can be mutually true it is hard for us to comprehend. But then it is hard for most of us to understand all sorts of everyday things: TV, Microwave, Cell Phone, Immune system of the body, what electricity really is, etc.

There are a number of illustrations which attempt to explain how three distinct things can be one as well. The three leafed clover, the three parts of an egg: shell, white and yolk; Red, green, blue light making white; water in three different forms, a person having different roles in life.

These are partial explanations but suggest other ideas which are not true. Most commonly the problem is modalism – the idea that God is really one person who acts in three different modes. Otherwise the illustrations suggest that the persons are each only part of God whereas we are forced to conclude from scripture that each is fully God in all attributes.

Quite an elegant illustration is to consider a cube⁴ made of one substance. For the purpose of the illustration the cube represents the Trinity.

- There is only one cube.
- There are 3 dimensions.
- The dimensions are coequal. This is not just to say they are same length but that can't say any of the dimensions is superior to the others.
- The dimensions will last as long as the cube.
- The dimensions are distinct from each other.
- The dimensions are consubstantial – they are made of the same stuff.
- If you point to or talk about any of the cube's dimensions you're actually referring to the cube.
- No dimension can exist apart from the others.
- If you take away any dimension the cube ceases to be a cube.
- The dimensions are as old as each other.
- It is ludicrous to say that one dimension is 1/3 of the cube. In fact it cannot be said what percentage of the cube is one dimension, or two of the dimensions.
- At no point in time did one dimension exist by itself, then was followed by the other 2 dimensions. The dimensions formed a cube from the beginning.



That has some good points in its favour – the obvious weakness is that it is so static and impersonal – which is a poor representation of the one who is essentially LIFE! However, all our efforts fall down at some point.

Heresies

I want to consider the importance of the Trinity. First of all, when people fail to hold to the doctrine of the Trinity what happens?

If we deny that there are three persons, then we say that there is one God in one person who appears in three different modes. This is called modalism. While it seems simple, the trouble is it says that every reference Jesus makes to the Father or the Spirit as separate from himself is false. It means that there are no personal relationships within the Godhead. To love requires someone to love and before creation there was no one else besides God. So how could God be eternally love before there was a creation to love? If however, the Trinity is true, God could be love with each person of the Trinity loving the others.

⁴ See https://www.reddit.com/r/Catholicism/comments/1msh6o/dimensions_of_cube_as_analogy_for_trinity_what/

Another denial of the Trinity is to say that there are three persons but the Son and the Spirit are not fully God. This is Arianism. Jesus is then either a superhuman or some sort of premier archangel but he is not God. This is what is taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses. In that case, Jesus cannot save us because to do that he had to be truly man and truly God. Sure enough, JW's don't believe in salvation by faith in Christ but rely on good works to earn salvation.

Another way people have tried to make sense of God's being is Adoptionism which says that Jesus was only a man but he was adopted by God to be his son. That means he is not divine in nature but only an exalted man. Once again it is not true to the whole revelation of Scripture and it is not possible for him to be our Saviour.

The Benefits

Having considered the problems of not believing in the Trinity, what do we gain from understanding God to be Trinity?

Dr Peter Leithart⁵ roots the divine attribute of love in the very nature of the Trinity. But he goes on to argue that our understanding of every single attribute of God should be informed by the Trinity.

Righteousness

He argues that righteousness is an quality of God. But what does it mean to be righteous if there is no other being. Righteousness may be defined as justice or as faithfulness in relationship. But this requires more than one person or it is meaningless. When the Bible tells of an eternally righteous God, the most that could be said without the Trinity is that God is potentially righteous.

Holiness

The same applies to holiness: Biblical holiness has to do with indwelling and possession. God consecrates things by coming near them and indwelling them with glory. He makes the tabernacle holy by his presence there. He claims places as his special places by putting his glory there.

In that case, a single person cannot be holy. Before creation, Unitarian god cannot be separated from everything and cannot indwell another – so could not be holy. However, with the Trinity as a holy communion, each person indwells the others and is indwelt by the other persons of the Trinity. They consecrate each other in a communion of holiness.

Glory

The Westminster Confession famously declares that "man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Some people think it says God is egotistical. But the understanding of the Trinity helps us understand that better.

What we see in the relationships of the Trinity is a mutual submission and a mutual desire to glorify the other. There is humility and a lack of selfishness. Jesus speaks of the glory with which the Father has glorified him, and he declares his intention to glorify the Father. Within the communion of God, the Father is not seeking glory from the Son; he is glorifying the Son. The Son is not seeking glory for himself, but he is seeking the glory of his Father. And the Spirit is not seeking glory for himself, but he is glorifying the Father and the Son, or he is the glory that glorifies the Father and the Son.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that relationship is at the very heart of all being. If it is inherent to the being of the Creator, it is intrinsic in the creation.

This means the closer our Christian life and its community the Church is to the nature of God, the more relational, communal, mutual, humble and joyful it will be because these flow from the nature of our Creator.

⁵ <https://blog.logos.com/2016/03/5-ways-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity-is-surprisingly-practical>

Perhaps most precious of all, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals that woven into the very fabric of the universe is the self-giving love of God.

Appendix: Comment on Proverbs 8 – a reading set for Trinity Sunday Year C.

Proverbs 8 has long history of being seen as a foreshadowing of Christ. There Wisdom is personified as working with God in creation. In the New Testament, Christ is referred to as the wisdom of God⁶. This planted the idea that the wisdom working with God in Proverbs was a way of talking about the Son working with the Father. So John the Evangelist could write that the wisdom and word of God was not just a personification but had come into the world in a human person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, "the Word made flesh".

We could dismiss this idea in Proverbs as merely a poetic device. But as the passage goes on Wisdom takes on a more personal aspect: "I was a craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence..." Now there seems to be a distinction of persons. Only a person can be filled with delight.

Now there is an apparent problem: the Proverbs 8 passage appears to say that wisdom was born. However, in other translations this is rendered brought forth and Dr Wayne Grudem says it can carry the meaning, "the Father began to direct and make use of the powerful creative work of the Son in the creation of the universe."⁷

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁶ 1 Cor 1:22-30

⁷ Grudem W., 1994, *Systematic Theology*, IVP, Nottingham, p230