

Tackling Tough Questions

Winter 2006 – GTW 1: The Mystery of the Triune God

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The Trinity? Why Bother?

How often do you really think about the Trinity? When we sing *Holy Holy Holy* maybe. But, does the Trinity really impact our theology, and just as importantly, how we live our lives as follower of Jesus Christ? Perhaps, given the fact that we live in the year 2006, isn't it time we gave up on that strange little doctrine and just deal with Jesus?

Perhaps no other doctrine is less talked about and more misunderstood than that of the Trinity. If you were taught about at some previous point, someone may have told you: "The Trinity is like water – sometimes its liquid, sometimes it's a solid – ice, and sometimes it's a gas – vapour. Such helpful attempts to explain the Trinity actually lead to greater problems (not the least of which such an example is what is known as the ancient heresy of Modalism. At other times we just say, "You know, its really just a mystery, so lets not worry about it." Indeed, the Trinity is one of those things that we confess, but its hardly one of things that we really act out in our lives.

In the decades though Christians around the world have come to realize that the Trinity not only one of those concepts we cannot give up on, it in fact lies at the heart of depth and width of the faith. So, lets get back to the Trinity!

Is it Biblical?

If you have ever had a discussion with a Jehovah's witness, they probably told you in the course of the discussion, "You know that the word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible." This is true...but without understanding that God is Triune, it is really hard to understand the God who reveals himself through the Scriptures. While the word "trinity" does not appear, the concept is woven through some of the passages that lie at the core of the faith.

Of course the great "Schema" of Israel, the confession of the Israelites found in Deuteronomy 6:4-6 begins by saying that God is one. So doesn't that mean that the Old Testament actually teaches against the Trinity? No, and in fact as a Trinitarian Christian I proudly proclaim the Schema with those Israelites. God is indeed one – we do not worship three gods (as some Muslims have accused Christians of doing. But in saying that God is one we are not saying that God is a monad – a singular and isolated creature. This is true even in the Old Testament, though it is much more hidden.

Genesis 1:1-3 and 1:26 have both been pointed at as Trinitarian passages by some. There is some difference of opinion but if you look at the text of Genesis 1:1-3 you do see illusions that the earliest Christians quickly took to be Trinitarian:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was [a] formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

There we see God, with the Spirit hovering over the depths and the speaking of the Word and the bringing about of creation. Some commentators think this is what St. Paul had in mind when he said in Colossians 1:16:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Further along we see in the creation of humanity (Genesis 1:26):

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, [b] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

This is a very controversial passage, as some do not see this as Trinitarian, but rather Yahweh God addressing the court of angelic beings. On the other side of the argument though is the fact that God says, "in our image, in our likeness," which cannot be any such court, as the angelic beings do not share God's image.

The importance of the word, as for example in Psalm 33:6, and especially the wisdom, of God as seen in Proverbs 8:12 ff. is a further pointer, and in a mysterious verse like Isaiah 48:16, in a strongly monotheistic context, we have a very close approach to Trinitarian formulation.

Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit.

Admittedly, the Hebrews saw God as one, and that led to much of the controversy that Jesus and later St. Paul had with their opponents. There are several stories from the Gospels, but my favourite is from John 8:54-49:

Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

St. Paul begins to run into issues with the religious leaders almost from the start, precisely because he stresses Jesus' divinity. Look at Acts 13:13-52 in Psidion Antioch. This will lead him to open many of his letters with some variants of that found in 1 Corinthians 1:3:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

While it certainly would have been helpful for God to simply say, "Here I am – and I live in Three Persons," that is not the way he chose to operate. And yet, through the process of the

people of God coming to know this God revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, God demonstrates that to be God means to be Father and to be Son and to be Holy Spirit, but always to be one.

Why We Need the Doctrine of the Triune God if We Are to Be Saved and to be in Fellowship with God

The New Testament texts do seem to leave us without a way out of the trap that God is more than the Father. If God is only the Father, than Jesus was a blasphemer or, as C.S. Lewis said, a lunatic. What is more, the entire hope that we have for salvation and the experience of fellowship with God becomes null and void without the Trinity.

If Jesus were not God, than he how can we be saved? The divinity of Jesus as the Son of God (but also clearly as fully human) is central in all the orthodox understandings of salvation in theology.

Martin Luther noted that because the Son of God became human that his righteousness becomes our righteousness. We would still be unrighteous, and therefore dead in our sins, unless the righteousness we receive from Jesus is the true righteousness of God. Calvin would agree with this, but also bring out the importance of Jesus' humanity for the work of our salvation (which we will discuss in another class later this year).

The most basic statement of the work of God in salvation (2 Corinthians 5:19), that in Jesus God was reconciling the whole world to himself, cannot be possible if Jesus is either not God or if there are three gods, because true reconciliation with the Father would not occur.

But the importance of the Trinity does not just end with a focus on the event of salvation (to leave aside the question of whether salvation is an event or a process). We are called to love God – it is says in the Westminster Confession:

“The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

But how can love that whom we do not know. Well, as St. Paul tells us in Romans 1, we are and never have been left without the knowledge of God, but to facilitate our love for God, the Father has sent the Son and the Spirit. As Jesus says in John 14:9: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” St. Paul also reminds us in Colossians 1 that in Jesus we have the image of the invisible God, and that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” To know and love God is to know and love Jesus, the Son of God.

But this leaves us only a binitarian God. Likewise the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential to our salvation and life of following and becoming like Jesus. Jesus makes this clear when he introduces the coming Spirit to the disciples in John 14:16-18

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you

know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

How does Christ come to us? Through the Holy Spirit. How are we called to experience conviction for our sins and repent? Through the Holy Spirit. How do we know God's love in our lives? Through the Spirit. How do we know and experience our adoption as children of God? Through the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

Through the Holy Spirit we are able to live a life that in accord with that which we say we believe. It is through the Holy Spirit that the work of the Son for which he was sent by the Father is made active in our lives.

The Spirit sometimes gets short-changed in Christian theology, especially among Presbyterians. Have you ever noticed that the Apostle's Creed has these wonderful lines about the Father and the Son, but when it gets to the Holy Spirit is simply says "*I believe in the Holy Spirit.*" The truth is that the Holy Spirit does not bring attention to himself, but rather on the Father and the Son:

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.(Jn 16:13-15)

Finally, the reality of salvation calls for Christian community, and such community, the Body of Christ, is created not by human minds that agree on things but by the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 4).

Okay, It Is Biblical and Necessary...But How Can We Understand This

First off, let me say that I am not saying we can "understand" God's nature and being. He is wholly (and holy) other, and is Spirit while we are but flesh. All we can talk about is analogies based on the way that the Triune God known in Jesus has revealed himself. And through these analogies we can, perhaps, see how it is that 3=1 and Father, Son and Spirit are One.

The chief problem arises because we think about the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspectives of mathematics. While it is true that $1^3=1$, that is really beside the point. What we know about God is that God is: a) Spirit b) Love and c) Personal (based on the names of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – or as Augustine called the Spirit – the bond of love between the Father and the Son). Working from these three central realities given to us in the Scriptures we need to understand the concept of the Trinity not mathematically, but relationally.¹

Here the clue comes again from the Gospel of John, in Chapters 14,15 and 16:

¹ As the early church fathers attested, God has substance, God is not "ethereal or an idea" and the substance is not necessarily love or relationship. But the operation of that substance in the three persons is at its core and most fully love – the ultimate relational reality. God is substantive, even if we cannot see him.

“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’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me;”(John 14:9-11)

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:4-8)

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. (John 15:26)

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:13-15)

In all four of these passages we have the image of one that exists on its own, but that also dwells within another thing. The first is that the Son is “in the Father,” the second, “believers are in Jesus,” the third “the Spirit is in the Father,” and finally we have the image of the Son taking that which is the Son’s and Father and making it know to us.

The Church Fathers coined a term to describe this. The term *perichoresis*, comes from the Greek words *peri* which means around and *choresis* from which we get our modern word for choreography. It means a never-ending, mutual interchange. Theologically, what we mean is that each member of the Trinity gives to the other two their fullness, and receive back from the other two who they are in full. Thus each person can be said (and again, these are human terms for a divine mystery) to be at all times dwelling in each of the other two members and indwelt by them. Yes, yes, I realize this is a “physical impossibility,” but again we are not talking about a created reality. Therefore when we encounter the Holy Spirit, we encounter a unique and whole person (to use the language of the creeds), but that person is who he is because of the what is received from the Father and the Son. Each of the three persons are truly persons – truly whole and full. This is the three side.

But, at the same time, that person could not be who they are aside from the shared reality (relationship and substance) they receive from the other two. One of the members of the Trinity could not “strike off” on their own and set-up another deity. They are only who they are in the

connection they have to each other. They are truly unified and one. This is not a threat but a beauty to God because each person so loves and trusts the other persons that they remain fully open to them to be indwelt and fully and freely give themselves to the other two members as well. We see this most fully in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. There is no hesitation or doubt, the Son goes because it is the Father's plan and he totally trusts the Father. Likewise with the Spirit.

Keep in mind that there is no hierarchy within the Trinity, no subordination of either the Son or the Spirit to the Father. For the Father could not be Father without the Son and Holy Spirit. The Triune God is not a dependent being, because all that is needed is found in each other. At the same time, there does seem to be a sense of willing submission on the part of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. But all three are equally God and all three are too intimately connected to each other to ever form a one-way hierarchy.

The Calling of Living and Walking with God

This interpenetration is what we are called to experience in the walk of faith that we can experience true life. The image of the vine, where we are not just "connected" to Jesus, but where he literally dwells within us, penetrates us (we cannot "dwell within God in the same way, but through Jesus' work we can "enter the holy of holies" and the altar with boldness). This only happens as we learn to trust and literally give ourselves fully to Jesus. This of course is not easy and natural as it is for the Triune God. We are fallen and our flesh resists God's very presence (think of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3). At the same time, as we grow in our trust and love for God, we open ourselves up more and more for Christ to dwell in us through the Holy Spirit, and in so doing we experience greater and greater love, by which we have the confidence to risk our very selves (knowing that we will not lose who we are but rather gain our true identity) and allow him in more and more.

The reality of the Triune God stands at the center of our spirituality and our life of faith. Rather than being able to toss aside the Trinity or merely treat like one of those things we confess and then ignore (sort of like baseball players and the National Anthem), we cannot experience the promise of salvation and the abundant life of the kingdom that God offers without understanding that when we pray to, worship, and speak about God it must be the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.