

God in Three Persons: The Trinity

How can God be three persons, yet one God?

“Christianity is not primarily about lifestyle change; it is about knowing God. To know and grow to enjoy him is what we are saved for.... The knowledge of this God turns life around.”

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, p.10

What do we believe in the EFCA?

God

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

It is important to remember the doctrine of the Trinity in connection with the study of God’s attributes.

- When we think of God as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and so forth, we may have a tendency to think only of God the Father in connection with these attributes.
- But the biblical teaching on the Trinity tells us that all of God’s attributes are true of all three persons, for each is fully God.
- Thus, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are also eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, infinitely wise, infinitely holy, infinitely loving, omniscient, and so forth.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith.

To study the Bible’s teachings on the Trinity gives us great insight into the question that is at the center of all of our seeking after God: ***What is God like in himself?***

We may **define the doctrine of the Trinity** as follows: *God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.*

Now, it is important here to make a distinction between “being” and “person,” which may come in helpful if you are ever in a discussion with a Muslim. Nabeel Qureshi in his book *No God But One: Allah or Jesus?*, makes the point that “person is not the same as being. Your being is the quality that makes you what you are, but your person is the quality that makes who you are. For example, we are humans. That is what we are. That is why we are called human beings. But what we are is not the same as who we are.... Unlike a human being, which has only one person. God has three persons. He is one being, Yahweh, in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He’s more than able to exist like that because he is God. If we say God is only one person, like humans, then we are making God in our image. Who are we to limit God. It is up to God to tell us who he is.”

How did we come to believe that God is one being who is three persons? It is because the Bible describes all three as divine, with distinct personalities.

The Oneness of God and the Threeness of God

God the Father

Exodus 20:1-3

And God spoke all these words, saying,

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.*

Deuteronomy 32:6b

*Is not he your father, who created you,
who made you and established you?*

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

"Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, ² that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

⁴ *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

What commands do you see mentioned in these passages?

Why do you think it was necessary to be so adamant that there is one God? What is the relevance of such an insistence today?

Do either of these passages deny the possibility of God eternally existing as three persons?

"Deuteronomy 6 is about God's people having the Lord as the one object of their affections: he is the only one worthy of them, and they are to love him alone with all their heart, soul, and strength (Deut 6:5). In fact, the word for 'one' in Deuteronomy 6:4 really doesn't convey 'mathematical singularity' at all well. The word is also used, for example, in Genesis 2:24, where Adam and Eve – two persons – are said to be one."

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, p. 13

God the Son

Exodus 3:13-14

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'"

John 8:58-59

⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

What claim was Jesus making for himself?

How did the religious leaders interpret Jesus' reference to being the "I am"?

John 10:25-33

²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" ³³ The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."

God the Holy Spirit

Acts 5:1-4

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. 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? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."

How do these verses demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is a personal, divine force?

Though Trinity is not a biblical word, there are passages which mention the three persons of the Trinity together.

Matthew 3:16-17

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."

Matthew 28:19

¹⁹ 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.

"Let us observe the solemn mention of the blessed Trinity which our Lord makes in these verses.... This is one of those great plain texts which directly teach the mighty doctrine of the Trinity. It speaks of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three distinct persons, and speaks of all as co-equal.... This truth is a great mystery.... Let us believe that no sinful soul could be saved without the work of all three Persons in the blessed Trinity and let us rejoice that father, Son and Holy Spirit, who cooperated to make us, always cooperate to save us. Here let us pause: we may receive practically what we cannot explain theoretically."

J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts: Matthew*, p. 371

2 Corinthians 13:14

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

In Paul's benediction, what characteristic is associated with each member of the Trinity?

What may this tell us about their individual roles?

Do you think there is anything here that Paul wants the Corinthians to recognize?

Does anyone see the Gospel in these three characteristics?

How does this apply to you?

Trinity Diagram

The Significance of the Trinity

Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so significant?

"The Trinity means that God is, in essence, relational." - Timothy Keller

You may recall when we started this elective that we addressed the topic of the existence of God.

- **If there is no God**, then everything around us is the product of blind impersonal forces. According to evolutionary naturalists, the experience of love may feel significant but it is only the result of a biochemical state in the brain.
- **But what if there is a God?** You have two options:
 - **God is unipersonal**
 - Until God created other beings there was no love, since love is something that one person has for another
 - This would mean this God may be all powerful, sovereign, and great from all eternity, but not love
 - You may recall our discussion in an earlier class on God's independence, which was defined as follows: ***God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy.***
 - If God had to create us to demonstrate love then he is now dependent on creation and no longer independent
 - **God is triune** (a little help from C.S. Lewis and Timothy Keller)
 - C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*: *"In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing – not even just one person – but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.... [The] pattern of this three-personal life is... the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality."*
 - Timothy Keller, in *The Reason for God*: *"The [inner] life of the Trinity is characterized not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love.... Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others."*
 - Keller goes on: *"Ultimate reality is a community of persons who know and love one another. That is what the universe, God, history, and life is all about.... When Jesus said you must lose yourself in service to find yourself (Mark 8:35), he was recounting what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been doing throughout eternity.... You were made for mutually self-giving, other-directed love. Self-centeredness destroys the fabric of what God has made."*

The Trinity, the Fall, and the Gospel

- Genesis 3 – The Fall – Sin and self-centeredness – we want the world to orbit about us, which leads to our own alienation and social disintegration
- *“We lost the dance. The dance of joyful, mutually self-giving relationships is impossible in a world in which everyone is stationary, trying to get everything else to orbit around them.”* – Keller
- But God desires not to leave us there. He sends the Son into the world to *“begin a new humanity, a new community of people who could lose their self-centeredness, begin a God-centered life, and, as a result, slowly but surely have all other relationships put aright as well.”* - Keller
- Through Jesus’ death on the cross, *“he centers upon us, loving us without benefit to himself,”* [Keller] which is what he has been doing with the Father and the Spirit for all eternity. Through Christ, we are able to rejoin “the dance” and be a part of the community of the Godhead.

“For it is only when we grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God. If the Trinity were something we could shave off God, we would not be relieving him of some irksome weight; we would be shearing him of precisely what is so delightful about him. For God is triune, and it is as triune that he is so good and desirable.”

Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, p.9