

Got Questions? What is the Trinity?
John 1:1-18; Matthew 28:18-20
October 3, 2010

When you are in a relationship with someone, it is natural to want to understand the person you are in relationship with. That natural desire is true even in our relationship with God. As creatures, we want to know the One who made us...the One who loves us...and the One whom we love.

Actually, knowing God isn't too difficult a thing until we begin to try, with our finite minds, to fathom some of the profound aspects of the fullness of who God is. One of those difficult aspects of God's reality is what we have come to call the Trinity.

This morning we're going to think for a few minutes about the technical aspects of the Trinity, but then I want to move on to what relevance a Trinitarian understanding of God has for us as Christian disciples.

The orthodox idea of the Trinity is that God (the Father), Jesus Christ (the Son), and the Holy Spirit are simultaneously three distinct beings, and all the same being, none subserviant to another, all three with complete equality and a single will. There was no time when any did not exist. The language of the church is *one substance, three persons*.

The notion that someone can simultaneously be three and one is impossible for us to comprehend. It goes beyond our understanding as people confined by space and time.

Sometimes it's helpful to try and understand a concept by understanding what it is not. In the study of God this is known as apophatic theology and can best be found illustrated in some of the heresies of the church. Here are a couple of explanations of the Trinity that the Church over the past 2000 years has said, "Close, but no cigar."

Monarchianism

The denial of three separate beings in the Trinity. A man by the name of Sabellius tried to teach the three persons of God are three facets of one personality, in the way that the sun is simultaneously hot, round, and bright.

Modalism (related to Monarchianism)

Held that God was a single being, and that Father / Son / Spirit were simply three *modes* of the same being, only one being possible at a time. Taken to its logical extreme, it would have been impossible for the Spirit to descend as a dove and God's voice to be heard during Christ's baptism.

Subordinationism

Any doctrine that subordinates one being of the Trinity to another...such as the Father creating the Son in time, and then the Spirit coming into being only at the ascension of the Son.

John Wesley confessed the mystery of the Holy Trinity as truth, while at the same time confessing that he did not fully understand it. In his sermon, *On the Trinity*, he writes:

I believe this *fact*...that God is Three and One. But the *manner*, how, I do not comprehend.... Now in this, in the *manner*, lies the mystery. And so it may; I have no concern with it. It is no object of my faith; I believe just so much as God has revealed and no more. But this, the *manner*, he has not revealed; therefore I believe nothing about it. But it would be absurd in me to deny the *fact* because I do not understand the *manner*. That is, to reject what God *has* revealed because I do not comprehend what he has *not* revealed.

Wesley is saying that God has not revealed to us exactly the manner in which the Godhead is able to exist as three yet one at the same time; yet, we know it to be true because of how we have experienced God and how he has chosen to reveal himself to us. We have Scriptures that point to God existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and further underscoring the Oneness of the Three.

John 1:1-18

*In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He existed in the beginning with God.
God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.
The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.*

John 16:13-15

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me.

From even these two, I hope you can see that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all work together with one will to accomplish everything in the mind and will of the Godhead.

Maybe more important than understanding the mechanics of the Trinity is having an idea about what it means for us as Christian disciples.

One person asked, “Is it necessary to believe in the Trinity in order to be a Christian?”

I would say that the answer is, “Yes.”

Just take one part of the Trinity, the Son. If you do not believe that Jesus is God, then the entire understanding we have of our atonement being accomplished by the perfect sacrifice of Emmanuel (God with us) comes crashing down.

To put it another way, can you be a good Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist and believe in God as Trinitarian – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? No, you can't. This understanding of God is unique and important to our Christian theology.

What other significance does the Trinity have for our lives as Christian disciples? So that you won't be here all afternoon, I'll briefly lift up only a few ideas – perhaps we can consider them more fully in another message.

- God is love: One of the highest attributes of God is love. This is actually another argument for the existence of the Trinity. Love cannot exist without an object...it only exists in relationship. The Father loves the Son (and vice versa) and the Spirit is the reality of that love bond. If there were no Son or Spirit, then there would be no object of love. Upon reflecting on the absence of a Trinitarian understanding of God in light of a God who is love, C.S. Lewis said such an understanding would imply that before the world was made God was not love.

The cross is central to the Trinity. In it we find the essence of the love of God...kenosis...self-giving, self-emptying love extended to us for the sake of our salvation.

If we are created in the image of God and are called to reflect God here on earth, then we are also called to love God and love one another with that same sacrificial love that has been shared with us. (Oddly enough these are the two objects of love that Jesus lifted as the greatest 2 commandments.)

- Trinity as community and relationship – The use of the word *Person* to describe the distinct parts of the Trinity is helpful because it reminds us that our God is a relational God. A person cannot be imagined only in him/herself, but only within the context of his/her relationships. Each *Person* of the Trinity is in relationship with you through your salvation. For Wesley this made God very personal. The Father is the source of grace, the Son is the evidence of God's love for you, and the Spirit is the One who sustains you and helps you grow in holiness.
- As we come to the Communion Table today, we are reminded by the very word *communion* that through the Holy Meal we participate in a new kind of community life with the Three-In-One. Here, there is a transformational intimacy that is both personal and universal. The community we experience at the Sacrament forms who we are as we are confronted in our collective memory with the realities of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and salvation born of love.

The self-contained community in which God has always existed is, for us, an example for us as Christians for how we are to live with the world around us. It is an example of how we are to

love and to sacrifice for the sake of one another and for those who may never acknowledge our existence. In the community of the Trinity we also find newness of life for ourselves.

As you come to the Table today, give thanks for the Three-in-One God who sacrificed that you might be able to enter into full communion with Him and all the company of heaven...one day at the heavenly banquet.