

The Doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation on which all other Christian doctrines are laid. Without the Trinity, God would be largely invisible, unknowable, unreachable and indescribable.

But the Biblical revelation is that God has indeed made Himself known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each having an entirely separate existence and unique identity, and yet being perfectly and intimately united as one. One God revealed as three Persons.

The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; but the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, the Father is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father, the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Son. And yet, they are all in each other and one with each other. This is the supreme example of unity and diversity within a community.

The Trinity is also an important truth because it shows us that love and language originate within the Godhead. God can only be love in essence because of the love shared between the 3 persons of the Trinity. Similarly, language, 'And God said....,' can only mean anything in the context of the plurality of God, otherwise He would have been talking to himself! The Trinity reveals that both love and language existed before the creation of human life, or, put another way, human love and language have their origins in God's Trinitarian nature.



Sometimes, in trying to explain the Trinity, we attempt to use an illustration. This always ends in disaster! Most of the attempts I've heard seem to involve one, or more, eggs! Shell, white, yolk with one egg, or even 3 eggs in a frying pan! Needless to say, these illustrations just seem to 'scramble' the issue rather than clarify it! Although the Bible often uses picture language to explain things, it never tries to explain the Trinity in this way ~ neither should we. The Trinity is a multiplicity of relationships to be embraced; it cannot be reduced to any simplistic picture.

So how is the doctrine of the Trinity presented and supported from the Bible, especially since the actual word 'Trinity' never appears? Well, right from the first chapter of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 1, the plural word is used for God ('elohim') and we also read that God says: "Let **us** make man in **our** image, in **our** likeness ..." So God is plural. In this chapter, we also see that God, the Spirit and the Word of God (later revealed in the New Testament as Jesus) are all active in creation.

But creation is not the only area in which the functions of the three Persons of the Trinity overlap. In our own personal relationship with God, the different members of the Trinity are all involved. God is the one who comforts us (2 Cor. 1:3&4) and the Holy Spirit is the comforter (Jn.14); Christ is our sanctifier (1 Cor.1:30) as is the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:2); Jesus is the Teacher and the Holy Spirit is the one who teaches us 'all things' (Jn.14); the Father loves us (Jn.17:23), Jesus loves us (Jn.13:1) and the Holy Spirit loves us (Rms.5:5).

In Deut.6:4 the shared function and plurality of God is balanced by the unity of God: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This unity is further demonstrated when Jesus says to Philip: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me (Jn.14:10), and where Jesus prays to the Father: "You are in me and I am in you" (Jn.17:21) and where Jesus says he will send another comforter identical to himself i.e. the Holy Spirit (Jn.14:16).

There is also a wonderful example of the unity and plurality of the Trinity at Jesus' baptism where the Holy Spirit descends on the Son and the Father's voice cries from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love..." (Luke 3:22). All 3 members of the Trinity are present. Little wonder that Jesus went on to commission his disciples then, and us now, to baptise new converts in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt.28:19).



Christ was alive before he was born!

Unlike you and I Christ existed before he was born. As God, he existed as the 'Spirit of Christ' before he was incarnated as a human baby. Not only, as we have already seen, was he present at creation (Gen. Chapter 1), but he also accompanied the Israelites as they left Egypt and journeyed in the desert (1 Cor. 10:1-5) and it was the presence of the 'Spirit of Christ' within the O.T. prophets that enabled them to speak as they did (1 Peter 1:10&11).

Also in considering the Person of Christ, we realise that the whole of John's gospel was written with one purpose in mind: to help believers go on believing that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God and that he was God made flesh. Here is my paraphrase of just the opening 4 verses from John's gospel: -

"From the very first moment that the universe was created, Jesus was already there and had been present from all eternity. He was the reason why creation came into existence. He had always been with God in a close and dynamic partnership and was himself God.

Everything that came into being did so through Jesus; nothing was made without his involvement. Life itself originated in him and his life provides the light that every member of the human race needs in order to be fully alive."
(John 1:1-4 – My Paraphrase).

The apostle Paul also emphasises the absolute unique supremacy of Christ. "All things were created **by** him all things were created **for** him and all things hold together **in** him (Col.1:16&17). Christ is like the hub at the centre of a bicycle wheel, for without the hub the whole wheel collapses. Life flies apart and makes no sense without Christ at the centre.



Indeed, the view that life has no meaning or purpose without God and Christ is well illustrated by an atheist like Richard Dawkins! He maintains that natural selection (discovered by Darwin) is the explanation for the existence of all life and that it has no plan, purpose, mind, vision or foresight! (See 'The Blind Watchmaker', London Folio Society 2007, P.5)

Christ was raised after he died!

Surprisingly, it's not quite biblical to say that Jesus 'rose from the dead'! It is biblical to say that 'he was raised from the dead.' Jesus couldn't raise himself from the dead, he was dead; and not only dead, but buried. Without the Trinity there is no possibility of resurrection ~ there would have been no-one around who could have raised Jesus from the dead!

Most Bible translations miss this important distinction preferring 'he has risen' to the actual aorist passive tenses used ('egerthe') 'he was raised' - (See Mt. 28:7&8 in the NIV for example). Jesus was passive in his resurrection, he couldn't raise himself.

So, when Peter & Paul were preaching in the book of Acts, they consistently taught that: 'wicked men put him [Jesus] to death by nailing him to the cross. **But God raised him** from the dead' (Acts 2:23&24), and, '**God has raised** this Jesus to life' (Acts 2:32), and, '**He [God] has given proof of this to all men by raising him** [Jesus] from the dead.' (Acts 17:31). See also Acts 3:15 & 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30-37.

Romans 1:4 in the New Living Translation also indicates the part the Holy Spirit played in the resurrection of Jesus: 'He [Jesus] was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Belief in the Trinity is essential for belief in the resurrection. No Trinity, no resurrection.

Let's consider now the Holy Spirit. Some Christians seem to be Binatarian (believing in Father and Son) but not so much Trinitarian (believing also in the Holy Spirit). But is the Holy Spirit an 'it' i.e. an impersonal influence or power, or is 'it' in fact a Person, a 'He'?

In the Greek language, Spirit '(pneuma') is neuter, so to be grammatically correct whenever a pronoun is used to refer to 'Spirit', the word 'it' should be used rather than 'he' (or 'she'). Sometimes John in his gospel observes this grammatical rule, but most times he does not!

So in John 16 verse 13, for example, we read: "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." John does this because he knows of the intimate connection between the Holy Spirit and Jesus.

And the rest of the New Testament confirms this. The Spirit is the 'Spirit of Jesus' (Acts 16:7), he is the 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Phil.1:19), 'God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts' (Gal. 4:6), 'Now the Lord is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17&18). And, of course, God Himself is Spirit (Jn.4:24) and the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ (Rms. 8:9). What a wonderful confirmation of the mystery and integrity of the Trinity!

The Trinity in his diversity and unity appears again in 1 Cor. 12:4-6: - "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same **Spirit**. There are different kinds of service, but the same **Lord**. There are different kinds of working, but the same **God** works all of them in all men."

The Trinity in his unity appears again in Eph. 4:4-6: - "There is one body and one **Spirit**... one **Lord**, one faith, one baptism; one **God** and Father of all...."

Let's look now at some of the practical implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

First of all the wonderful reality and re-assurance of all three members of the Trinity living in us and then, secondly, the Trinity as the pattern for our inter-personal relationships.

1. The Trinity living in us

Simone Weil, the French Philosopher, said: "All sins are attempts to fill voids."

I remember once being asked to speak in an Anglican church at a Watch-night Service. The church was situated next door to a pub and I was warned that, just before the midnight hour, people would pour out of the pub and into the church building! Sure enough, that's what happened! The church filled up and what I can only describe as an 'alcoholic haze' settled over the jolly congregation!

I chose to speak on this verse from Ephesians 5: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

This verse acknowledges that all of us need filling; the desire to be filled is universal, but we have a choice as to what we are filled with ~ something, or someone.

In her book: 'Speaking of Sin – The Lost Language of Salvation', [Canterbury Press Norwich, 2015], Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "Because we cannot stand the God-shaped hole inside of us, we try stuffing it full of all sorts of things, but it refuses to be filled. It rejects all substitutes. It insists on remaining bare. It is the holy of holies inside of us, which only God may fill."

Jesus said: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and **we** will come to him and make our home with him.” What a wonderful truth! Father and Son at home with us.

And Paul reminds us of ‘Christ in you the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:27) and of the importance of continually being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). And in a majestic Trinitarian prayer he prays that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, knowing the width, length, height and depth of the love of Christ and the power of the Spirit in our inner being (Eph. 3:16-19).

What a privilege to have all three members of the Trinity at home and at work in us and through us!

2. The Trinity as the pattern for our inter-personal relationships

Another important lesson we learn from the doctrine of the Trinity is that it is meant to be the pattern for our relationships. Our attitude in relating to one another in the Church is to be based on the pattern of relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So what might this mean in practice?

It means that our churches should display a unity in our diversity. Wherever possible in our multi-cultural communities, our congregations should be comprised, not of single ethnic groups, but made up of folks from every nation, tribe and people group.

This is the unity Christ prayed for to the Father: “that they may be one as we are one” (Jn. 17:11) and for which he died: “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross...” (Eph. 2:15&16).



In their context, these verses in Ephesians are about the reconciliation of Jew & Gentile. Therefore we need to repent of two millennia of Christianity’s animosity and anti-Semitism expressed towards Jewish people.

However, 'oneness' means we have to work at it, unity doesn't come easily in the context of our separate identities and our different cultural/national backgrounds. Deep historical and antagonistic feelings still exist between many people of different nations e.g. Chinese/Japanese, Sri Lankans/Indians, Croatians/ Serbians etc. but in the Church, distinctions must not be allowed to cloud our essential harmony in Christ.

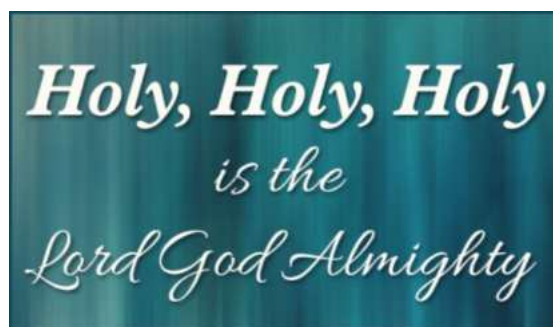
All of us must 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph.4:3). This is likely to require an on-going process of repentance, forgiveness and adaptation.

Relationships based on the Trinitarian pattern also mean not putting 'I' at the centre but wanting to prioritise the needs and interests of others. The Father glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son etc. Similarly, we are to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility to consider others better than ourselves.

We are called not just to be humble but to be completely humble; and to be gentle and to be patient and to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2). Only then will the reality of the Trinity be demonstrated in our relationships and in our churches.

The Holy Trinity

There is another word associated with the Trinity that I haven't yet mentioned and that is the word 'Holy'. We usually refer to the Trinity as the 'Holy Trinity' and this is correct. Father, Son and Spirit are all 'Holy'.



.....is repeatedly chanted in heaven (Rev. 4:8). Jesus addresses his Father as: 'Holy Father' (Jn. 17:11), the Spirit is the 'Holy Spirit' (Jn. 14:26; Acts 8:15-17), and Jesus is the 'Holy and Righteous One' (Acts 3:14), so.....

What does 'Holy' mean for us?

First of all, for me, it means that God is not to be trifled with. He needs to be treated with awesome respect. I learned about this aspect of holiness when I first became a Christian whilst working in power stations.

Transformers increased the voltage of the electricity we generated to 400,000 volts. Everywhere there were warning signs depicting the figure of a man with a lightning bolt going through him and the words: 'Danger of death'! This taught me about having a healthy fear of the Lord!



But even though this is how God's holiness is sometimes portrayed under the old covenant (e.g. Ex. 19:10-13; 20:18-21), it is not the whole story. Holiness is not about us having a phobia about God which causes us to keep our distance from him, but, under the new covenant, it is about **intimacy with the Trinity**.

Now in Christ we are regarded by God as being 'Holy' (1 Cor. 6:11; Col.1:22). It is His will that we should be Holy (1 Thess. 4:3), Jesus prayed that we would be sanctified, made Holy by the truth of God's word (Jn. 17:17) and Peter reminds us that we have been chosen by the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Christ (1 Peter 1:2).

Sainthood (holiness) is not the privilege of the few, it is the standing and calling of every Christian. So when Paul addressed the church in Corinth he wrote: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with **all those everywhere** who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.... together with **all the saints** throughout Achaia" (1 Cor. 1:2 & 2 Cor. 1:1).

Sainthood is not elitist; it is open to all.

Although holiness (sanctification) does mean that we are set apart for God's use and are called to avoid immorality, impurity and all other sins, it does not mean separation and isolation from the world. We are not to fear contamination from our environment. Rather we are to be salt and light in it.

Some people believe that holiness is a purely spiritual expression that has no real place in the physical/material world. But this is not Biblical holiness, which finds no separation between the spiritual and the material.

God's interest is in the world as it is and in human beings as they are. Indeed, 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.' (Jn.3:17). God's holiness does not preclude his intense concern for, and involvement with, the world.

This means that Holy people have to be in dirty places. As Rowan Williams comments in his book 'Being Disciples' [SPCK, 2016]: "Being holy is being absolutely involved, not being absolutely separated."

However, we do also need to be checking out that by our presence we are transferring holiness to people and situations rather than us being contaminated by their uncleanness. Both holiness and uncleanness are transferable and can be 'caught'. We are to watch what we 'touch.'

Meanwhile, Jesus continues to pray for us: not that we be taken out of the world but that we are protected in the world from the evil one (Jn.17:15). Remembering that Jesus sanctified himself by dying amidst the squalor of the Cross (Jn.17:19).

And so, as we, his saints, go out into the world, may we do so with a new confidence in the Doctrine of the Trinity and discover afresh the Holiness of the Trinity operating in our personal lives and relationships as we shine like stars in the dark and dirty places.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all (2 Cor. 13:14). Amen.

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