

Is The Doctrine Of The Trinity That Vital?

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

One of the challenges within Christendom is comprehending the various doctrines of our faith, especially the more obscure ones; as well as explaining those which seem to be in conflict with one another. One such challenge involves the concept of the *Trinity*.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a foundational Christian principle, and has been for centuries (*since the second or third centuries*). In fact, today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday of the church season of Trinity.

The Christian belief in the Trinity is one of the doctrines that set Christianity apart from all other religions in the world. There are Polytheists (*many gods*), Pantheists (*god is in everything*), Atheists (*no gods*), and Monotheists (*Jewish, Muslim, and Christian*). But only Orthodox Christianity holds the unique Biblical view of God as Triune. And amongst core Christian groups, there is no argument as to the foundational role of this truth.

* “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life.” - Catholicism

* “The fundamental truth of the Orthodox Church is the faith revealed in the True God: the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” - Greek Orthodox

* “We teach that the one true God. is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, three distinct persons, but of one and the same divine essence, equal in power, equal in eternity, equal in majesty, because each person possesses the one divine essence .” - LCMS (Missouri Synod)

* “The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.” - Southern Baptists

But do many really understand what is meant by the term *Trinity*, and doesn't it conflict with other established Biblical truths, such as the overarching principle of Monotheism (*there is only one God*)?

Deut 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! (also Mark 12:29)

Is 44:6 "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me. (also 1 Kings 8:60)

So, if the Bible is this clear about the singular identity of our God, and the unwavering truth of this doctrine, then how can there be three? Well, we'll start by explaining what we mean by the term Trinity.

A. Trinity, a biblical truth, but not a biblical term.

We should begin by explaining that the term trinity is not found in the Bible. The concept is clearly taught, but not actually identified with a singular term. That didn't happen until the second and third centuries; the early years of the Christian church.

Theophilus (A.D. 168-183), and/or Tertullian (A.D. 220), were the first to utilize the term (particularly Tertullian), as far as recorded history can assert. In one of his defenses

of the faith, Tertullian explained that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were "*one in essence - not one in Person.*"

In 325AD, the Council of Nicea took up the issue when an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius began promoting a theology claiming that Jesus was not God but a created being (*Arianism*). It was at this Council that our Nicene Creed was formulated as a statement against such heresies. In this creed we see the phrases, "*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.*" This conviction was echoed in 381 by the Council of Constantinople as they dealt with some of the same false teachings.

B. So what is Trinitarianism?

In this doctrine of the Trinity we hold to several specific principles:

1. That God is one, and that there is but one God
2. That the Father is a distinct divine Person, distinct from the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3. That Jesus Christ was truly God, and yet was a Person distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit.
4. That the Holy Spirit is also a distinct divine Person.

- Easton's Bible Dictionary

Martin Luther once wrote, "*Of these Persons each one is the whole God, besides whom there is no other God.*" In 1537, He would pen the *Smalcald Articles*. One of the principles discussed in the *Smalcald Articles* was the Trinitarian stand on the godhead.

"*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*" are designations of three persons; hence the Christian Church teaches, on the basis of Scripture: "*God is one, and yet in the one divine essence are three distinct persons.*" ("*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three distinct persons in one divine essence and nature, are one God, who has created heaven and earth.*")

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (*one of our historic Lutheran confessions*), we find these statements:

"*We declare that we believe and teach that there is one divine essence, undivided, etc., and yet, that there are three distinct persons, of the same divine essence and coeternal, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This article we have always taught and defended, and we believe that it has, in Holy Scripture, sure and firm testimonies that cannot be overthrown. And we constantly affirm that those thinking otherwise are outside the Church of Christ and are idolaters and insult God.*"

Lutheran theologian, John Theodore Mueller, in his text *Christian Dogmatics* makes these observations: "*...we mean to say that the divine essence with its attributes is not divided among the three Persons, so that the Father has one-third, the Son one-third, and the Holy Ghost one-third, but that each Person has the whole divine essence entire and undivided.*"

B. But where is the biblical support?

Over the centuries, many have struggled with the fact that this doctrine is known by a name that isn't

found in Scripture. It has even opened the church up to criticism by those antagonistic to Biblical Christianity. Luther himself admitted that it does not “*sound well so to call God*”; but he adds that, “...*since the article of the Holy Trinity is so far beyond our human mind and language, God must pardon us if we stammer and prattle about it as well as we can, provided only that our faith is pure and right; for the term Trinity merely expresses the truth that God is three in person and one in divine essence.*” It is important, therefore, for the church to understand the Scriptural support for this critical theological cornerstone.

From Genesis 1 we see this truth introduced (us/our).

Gen 1:2 The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

Gen 1:26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (also in 3:22, the term “Us”)

The prophet Isaiah echoes this plural identity:

Is 6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Many passages reference three distinct persons, especially the unique union of the Father and Son.

Matt 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

John 15:26 "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, {that is} the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me,

John 16:14 "He (*the Spirit*) will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose {it} to you. 15 "All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose {it} to you.

1 Cor 8:6 yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we {exist} for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we {exist} through Him.

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

Titus 3:4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and {His} love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

1 Pet 1:2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

One Trinitarian heresy was so significant that an entire creed was written to detail its critical errors:

THE ATHANASIAN CREED (first article)

"This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God without confusing the Persons or dividing the divine substance. For the Father is one Person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is still another, but there is one Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, equal in glory and coequal in majesty.

What the Father is, that is the Son and that is the Holy Spirit: the Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated; the Father is unlimited, the Son is unlimited, the Holy Spirit is unlimited; the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal; and yet They are not three Eternals but one Eternal, just as there are not Three Who are uncreated and Who are unlimited, but there is One who is uncreated and unlimited.

Likewise the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord, and yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.

For just as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge each Person by Himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the Christian religion to say that there are three Gods or three Lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten by anybody. The Son was not made or created, but was begotten by the Father. The Holy Spirit was not made or created or begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father and not three Fathers, one Son and not three Sons, one Holy Spirit and not three Holy Spirits. And among these three Persons none is before or after another, none is greater or less than another, but all three Persons are co-equal and coeternal, and accordingly, as has been stated above, three Persons are to be worshiped in one Godhead and one God is to be worshiped in three Persons..."

And thus it continues, with this statement and proclamation clearly defined:

"Whoever wishes to be saved must think thus about the Trinity."

So is the Doctrine of the Trinity Vital? Absolutely!

Several additional support passages:

Is 42:1; Matt 12:15-18; Matt 12:28; Mark 1:8; Luke 1:35; Luke 3:21-22; John 3:34-36; John 7:39; John 10:30; John 14:10-17, 26; John 20:22; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor 12:3-6; Gal 4:4-6; 2 Thess 2:13-16; Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 John 5:6-9