

The Faith We Confess:
A Series of Sermons on the Core Doctrines of the Christian Faith
One God in Three Persons: “Why the Doctrine of the Trinity is Important”

Life would be so much easier for us Christians if we did not have the doctrine of the Trinity.

If our concept of God were Unitarian instead of Trinitarian we could then say that God is One, not One in Three or Three in One. Imagine that for a moment. God has no Son, there is no third person called the Holy Spirit; therefore we do not have to try to explain how it is that we believe in one God who exists in three persons. Life would be easier for us because Unitarianism is so much easier to conceptualize. But the easy way is not the best way in this case; it rarely is.

Today we are going to consider an enormous topic, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We are doing this because the Nicene Creed is a Trinitarian creed. If you look at it you will see that it is Trinitarian in its structure. We believe in God the Father. We believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, God of God, light of life, very God of very God... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of all life...

The Dilemma of Arianism

You may recall from the first sermon in this series that the Nicene Creed came into being because of major disputes that were erupting in the church about questions concerning the nature of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus simply a created being (*a creature*) who was created before the world and then had the world made through him at a later time? (*As Arius said*) Or is Christ (*along with the Father and the Holy Spirit*) an eternal uncreated being who exists from throughout all eternity, by whom, from whom, and through whom all things were made? (*As Athanasius said*)

To put it in layman’s terms, is Jesus Christ nothing more than a glorified “spiritual guru” who had “God-like” characteristics, or is he fully and completely and eternally God the Son who came down to us in human flesh?

On the surface this question might sound like it is not worth debating; something that ought to be confined to two eggheads in the halls of academia, but not so fast.

The point that Athanasius pressed against the position of Arius was that if Jesus Christ is not God in human flesh, if he is not an eternal uncreated being, if he is simply an exalted human being only with “divine like” characteristics then how can he save us from our sin? How can his death on the cross atone for man’s sins if this is all he is? If humans are going to be saved, if they are going to be reconciled back to God, then it is something that God must do; therefore if Christ is not God then his work on the cross would be in vain because a creature, no matter how exalted or great he may be, cannot save another creature from his sin! Only God can save us humans from our sin. By pressing this point upon the church Athanasius forced her to see the dilemma she would put herself in if it were to accept the position of Arius. Consequently, the church was compelled to side with Athanasius and his formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed.

Some people say that if it was the church who formulated this doctrine then why do we make such a big deal of it? Doesn't that make the Trinity a man-made doctrine?

The answer is no.

Though you will **not** find the word "Trinity" in the Bible you will find what it teaches clearly taught in the Scriptures. The Bible teaches that God is both One and Three.

God is One

The most central and unique affirmation of the Old Testament, the one affirmation that clearly set its revelation apart from all the other ideas about God in the surrounding cultures, was the affirmation that God is One. There is only one God, not thousands of gods. People may worship a thousand different gods, but those gods do not exist; they are figments of the human imagination. There is one God only. He is eternal and he is Spirit. He is not an animal, he is not a man, he is not the water, or the sun, moon, and stars, or a storm, or a sea creature. God is God and there is only one true God.

The Shema begins by saying, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the LORD is **one**." (Deut. 6:4)

Jesus reaffirmed this truth when he referenced the Shema as being the greatest commandment.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the LORD is **one**. You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind and with all your strength." (Mk. 29-30)

The apostle Paul stated in Ephesians 4:5 that there is "One Lord, one faith, one baptism; **one** God and Father of all."

So the Bible is very clear from beginning to end, in both the Old and New Testaments, that there is only one God.

Yet the Bible also makes it clear that this one God exists in three persons.

Yet God is Three

We get subtle clues of the Trinity in the OT.

When God created the world it says that the "Spirit of God hovered over the waters." So right there in the first book of the Bible the Holy Spirit is credited with the creation of the world. Later when God created man, God said, "Let **us** make man in our image." Here we have the language of plurality. Who is this one God who identifies himself as "us" and "our"? Could he be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Then there are little triads in the OT like Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty." Could this be a subtle reference to the One true God who exists in three persons?

But it is in the NT where the doctrine of the Trinity is most explicitly taught.

Jesus Christ made the audacious claim to be God in the flesh. He did this when he claimed the divine name for himself in the seven "I AM" statements from the gospel of John. The Hebrew personal name for God in the OT is *Yahweh* and it means "I AM who I AM."

Jesus said "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the gate for the sheep," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," "I am the resurrection and the life," and "I am the vine."

Jesus made these earth shattering statements while at the same time still speaking about his relationship to God the Father. We see him in the scriptures always praying to the Father, seeking his Father's will, and talking about how he and the Father are One.

So what we have here is Jesus claiming to be God but also acknowledging the Father to be God. Clearly the Father and the Son are two different persons, yet there is oneness to their relationship.

Jesus also claimed to be God every time he forgave sins. Only God can forgive.

The NT attributes the creation of the world to Christ. "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. He is before all things and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:16-17) Only God can create the world.

So the Bible is not ambiguous in teaching that Jesus is God while at the same time teaching that the Father is God.

The same thing can be said of the Holy Spirit. The Bible names him as God in a way that is distinct and different from God the Father and God the Son.

The Holy Spirit is the life giver and no one can know Jesus apart from his work. It is the Spirit who rebirths the dead heart of a sinner to faith in Christ. It is the Spirit who empowers the church to lives of holiness that glorify God. The work of the Holy Spirit is the work of God.

Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as being sent to live inside of us as our comforter and advocate. The Holy Spirit replaces the physical presence of Christ in our lives. If Christ is God and the Holy Spirit replaces the presence of Christ in our lives, then what does that make the Holy Spirit? It makes him God, along with the Father and the Son.

So it was this kind of reflection on the Holy Scriptures that led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The church had no choice, she was compelled to. The witness of the Bible forced her to do it.

I like how Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School put it.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the result of Christian reflection on the history of salvation. How could the Old Testament affirmation “God is one” be reconciled with the NT affirmation that “Jesus is Lord,” together with the early Christian experience of the Holy Spirit as truly God, no less than the Son and the Father?

The answer to that question is that the church did it by sharpening its Biblical thinking through the doctrine of the Trinity.

You see, if we let go of the Trinity then we let go of the Bible, the very source of our authority and sustenance. We do not want to go there. Not only that, but if we let go of the Trinity we let God of Himself. The Trinity is who God is. If we deny that scriptural truth or if we don't seek to understand him as such then we let go of God. How can we say we love God if we make no effort understand God as the One Triune God who eternally exists in three persons?

The Trinity, for sure, is not an easy concept to grasp, especially when we try to understand it in mathematical terms (something we ought not try to do because in math one is one and three is three!), but because the Trinity stretches us Christians often get intellectually lazy and they chuck it up as something not worth dwelling on. This is a travesty.

The God of Relationships and Us

What I want to do right now is give you one reason why the Trinity is absolutely necessary for our Christian faith; one reason why if you let go of it you will have a massive negative effect on the most important doctrine of the Christian faith.

The reason I want to give you is the relationship.

You were created by God to be in relationship with him. The Bible says that God breathed his “breath of life” in you. That means you were created to be in relationship with him. The Bible also says that you sinned, but the good news of the gospel is that even though you sinned God is still pursuing the relationship with you. “Where are you Adam?” God asked in the garden. God has always been looking for man in his shame and guilt because God is all about the relationship with you.

It is this truth of the gospel that disallows Christians from being deists. A deist is someone who believes that God created the world but then abandoned it to run on its own by the laws of nature, but Christians reject this understanding. We believe that God created the world in order to be intimately involved with it, especially people. God made man a relational creature; relating to one another as humans and then most importantly, relating to God.

Now what does this have to do with the Trinity? In the Trinity we have a relationship. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each share in a wonderful, perfect relationship of love, fidelity, mutuality, truth, and beauty. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit all relate, commune, and fellowship with one another in that kind of way.

The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are each a distinct individual person (*by person I mean they are each an uncreated, eternal being*) but their oneness is found in their unified and unbroken relationship to and with one another.

It is in this inner shared relationship of love where we ought to seek to understand the oneness of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all One God by virtue of the oneness of their relationship.

So then is it any wonder that we humans are relational creatures? We are the way we are because God is that way! And because the one Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is relational he wants to pull us back into that relationship of oneness and love with him.

The God I am talking to you about this morning can be known. He is not a remote, distant, Unitarian God who exists alone all by himself, but rather he is an intimate Trinitarian God of relationships, first within himself, and then second with us. And everything thing that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, does works in concert with one another as it concerns our relationship with God. There are no fights or disagreements in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; for they are each on the same page.

The Father because of his great love for the world has sent the Son into the world in order to redeem it back into relationship with God. The Son willingly obeyed the Father and came into the world in order to make that happen through his death on the cross, and the Holy Spirit works to convict our hearts of our sin and our need for a Savior. And once the Spirit brings us to faith in Christ he constantly works to inwardly assure us that we will be kept in this wonderful relationship of love with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.