

At Christmas, we celebrated God the Father's love for us in sending us his Son in human flesh. During Holy Week, especially on Good Friday and Easter, we celebrated God the Son's saving sacrifice for us. Last weekend, on Pentecost, we celebrated the work of God the Holy Spirit, especially his gift of faith to us so that we believe in both the Father and the Son. So this weekend we consider all three together, which is really to consider just one, the one true God, whom we call the Holy Trinity. We want to consider his awesome nature, which goes beyond human understanding.

To set the foundation and tone for this devotion, listen to Matthew 28:18–20:

MATTHEW 28:18–20. (NIV84)

Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I should begin by acknowledging something that sometimes comes as a surprise even to long-time Christians: The words *Trinity* and *triune* do not appear anywhere in the Bible. However, that doesn't automatically mean that they are illegitimate names or terms, or that the doctrine of the Trinity is a human invention. When we use a name or term in theology, it doesn't matter so much whether that name or term is found in the Bible. What matters is whether what the name or term means or describes is found in the Bible. For instance, the word *hexameral* is not found in the Bible, but it is perfectly biblical to say that the Bible teaches a hexameral creation, because *hexameral* means "in six days," and the Bible does clearly teach that God created the world in six days. So again, whether the name or term is found in the Bible doesn't matter as much as if what the name or term means or describes is found in the Bible.

So what does Trinity mean, or what does the name Trinity say about God, and is its meaning or description about God found in the Bible? *Trinity* is an abbreviated form of *Tri-Unity*, which simply means "three-oneness." That is, a trinity is a being that is both three and one at the same time. Same with *triune*; it simply means "both three and one" or "three in one." And the Bible definitely does describe God as both three and one.

God's oneness is stated all over the Scriptures. "Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God; the LORD is one," Moses said in Deuteronomy 6:4. Through his prophet Isaiah, God said, "I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God" (Isa. 45:5). Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4 in the New Testament (Mark 12:29), and the apostle Paul explicitly says there is only one God on multiple occasions (Rom. 3:30; Gal. 3:20).

But he is also described in plural terms. The Hebrew word for *God* used throughout the Old Testament is plural in form, even though it is used with singular verbs when describing the true God. More than once God refers to himself as "us" (Gen. 1:26; Isa. 6:8). In fact, right before God refers to himself as "us" in Isaiah 6, Isaiah heard angels describe him not just as "holy," but as, "holy, holy, holy." We have passages like Genesis 19:24, which describes the LORD raining down fire and brimstone from the LORD. We have passages that refer to God's Son (Psalm 2:7, 12) and to the Spirit of God (e.g. Gen. 1:2; 2 Sam. 23:2).

In the New Testament, we have three persons described as God appearing side by side and listed side by side. At Jesus's baptism, God the Father spoke from heaven, calling Jesus his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:16–17). In the verses I read at the start of this devotion, we heard Jesus command his disciples to baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the verse I used for our devotion last week, Jesus mentioned all three together: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me” (John 15:26). At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). We could cite many more passages that support all of these, which state either explicitly or implicitly that God is three and that God is one.

So how do we speak of this mystery properly? Well, our Christian church fathers came up with a way to help us say nothing more and nothing less than what Scripture says, and to help us not fall into the error of worshipping multiple gods on the one hand or of denying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on the other hand. They spoke of God as only one essence or being, and made sure always to speak of only one true God, just like the prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself did. But they also spoke of three divine persons in the one true God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They did not use the term *person* in the sense of “human being,” like we do, but in the sense of that which subsists by itself—that is, that which is not created by someone or something else, is not a parasite that derives its existence from a host creature, is not a portion or fragment of something else, and is intelligent and incommunicable. *Incommunicable* means that it does not share what it is with something else. The divinity of God is communicable and is shared equally with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But the personhood of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are incommunicable. In other words, there is only one Father, only one Son, and only one Holy Spirit, distinct from each other, though they are each 100% God. So, for instance, God the Son died on a cross; the Father and the Holy Spirit did not.

Sometimes the easiest way to understand something is to know what it is not. So let's briefly look at some false teachings about the Trinity that have sprung up over the years. One false teaching that has sprung up in different guises ever since about 200 AD can be called modalism. Modalism holds that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not distinct persons, but God showing himself in different ways. Modalism sort of thinks of God as the actor in a play, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three different roles that he plays. Sometimes he puts on his Father hat, sometimes his Son hat, and sometimes his Holy Spirit hat.

Not only would a modalist have difficulty describing what was happening at Jesus's baptism, when all three persons of the Trinity made themselves known simultaneously, but a modalistic view of God also undermines what he has done for us. The apostle Paul says that God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us (Rom. 8:32). But in modalism, God would only be pretending to do that, not actually doing that, because you need two distinct persons for a Father to give up his Son. Modalism therefore calls all of God's saving work into question.

Another false teaching is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each make up only one-third of God, like a three-slice pizza or like the three leaves of a clover. If this were the case, prayer, for example, would become an exhausting exercise, since a prayer addressed only to one

person of the Trinity would not be addressed to all of God. We would need to painstakingly apportion and divide our worship equally to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; otherwise we would be glorifying God lopsidedly and showing favoritism to one or two parts of God. In reality, when we worship or pray to the Father, we worship God, period. Same with the Son. Same with the Holy Spirit.

A now-infamous false teacher named Arius taught in the early 300s that the Son was not God, but was a creation of God. His tagline was, “There was a time when he was not,” which meant that God the Son had a beginning and was not eternal. Arianism sort of compares God to the sun in the sky, with God the Father being the sun or star itself, the Son being like the sun’s light, and the Holy Spirit being like the sun’s heat. Thus the Son and the Holy Spirit become creations of God rather than one with God himself. We could also get this false impression about the Son when we rightly confess that he is begotten of God the Father (Prov. 8:22–31; John 3:16). In every other context, if you are begotten of a person, you are created by that person and came after that person. But Jesus was begotten of the Father *from eternity*; I can’t explain how that works, but I know that the Bible says it. Same with the Holy Spirit: If he proceeds from the Father and the Son, then they must have come first, right? That’s not what the Bible says. The Bible calls him God, and God is eternal.

If Jesus is not of one being with the Father and co-divine with the Father, then his life and death cannot have infinite value and count for you and me and all people, as the Bible says it did.

Another false teacher even compared the Trinity to Cerberus, the three-headed dog-monster in Greek mythology who guarded the entrance to Hades. This false teaching combines aspects of both modalism and partialism.

So we can clearly see that *Trinity* and *triune* are terms that work very simply and well to describe what the Bible says about God. But ultimately, the teaching of the Trinity is not something we will fully comprehend this side of heaven. How can one plus one plus one equal one? How can the Father and the Holy Spirit each fully be the one true God and not die on the cross, but God the Son is also fully the one true God and did die on the cross, so that it is proper both to say that God is immortal and cannot die and that God did die? I don’t know. What I know is that, if we fully understood him, that would most likely be a sign that humans had invented him rather than the other way around. More importantly, I know that this is what the Bible teaches about God, and that it is this God who gives us the full assurance and certainty of our eternal salvation, and the peace and joy that come with it.

Glory be the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.