

## THE TRINITY, HISTORY, LIFE AND WORSHIP

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### HOW IS STUDY OF WHO GOD IS, ESPECIALLY AS TRINITY, IMPORTANT FOR OUR LIVES?

Before we turn to understanding the triune God in our daily lives, it is helpful to briefly overview how the early church, after the NT, unfolded the doctrine of the Trinity. The Athanasian Creed will help put much together. Then we will look at how trust in our Lord at Trinity changes how we see everything: our universe, ourselves as created in God's image, our relationships with other is marriage, family, the local church, and even society. And how it is that God provides and secures salvation for us and all who believe in his Son. Finally, how can we better worship our Lord.

### A BRIEF HISTORY: EARLY CHURCH STEPS TO CLARIFYING THE TRINITY

[Some may wish to jump ahead to practical application.]

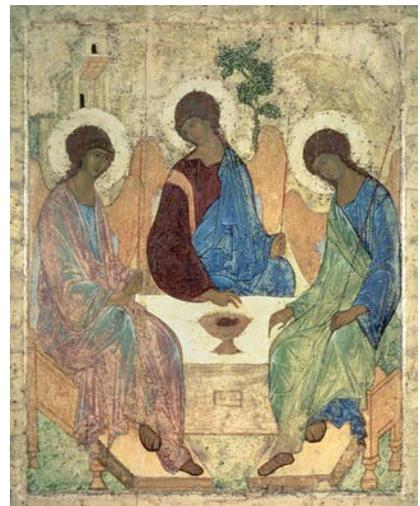
#### 1. THE PATH TO THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA (AD 325)

With a strong Jewish background, the early church emphasized the unity of God amidst persecution and rapid growth with the result that no clear doctrine of the Trinity was articulated. Even in the first century baptism were widely practiced "in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (*Didache* 7.1, 3). Around AD 110 Ignatius and Shepherd of Hermas already spoke of the one God and three divine persons. Later in the 2d century, Athenagorus and Theophilus used triadic terms (Gk. *triados*). Tertullian (d. 225) was the first to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity (Lat. *trinitas*) as three persons and one essence—although his definition appears inadequate since it implied that the Son is less than co-eternal with the Father. Others also spoke of the Son emerging into existence from within the Father. Origen first suggested the "eternal generation of the Son." In 318, a presbyter in Alexandria Egypt named Arius explicitly denied the full deity of the Son, describing him as "a god"—one made by God (thus with a beginning and subject to change). Convened by Emperor Constantine in 325, the Council of Nicaea rejected the Christology of Arias, instead affirming that the Son is fully God in the same sense as the Father. One of the greatest difficulties of this period was that neither terminology nor philosophic categories existed to describe what the Bible seemed to be saying about Jesus Christ. The church fathers were forced to invent new categories in order to describe truly biblical teaching against deviant views twisting the same biblical terms.

See the Nicene Creed in Part 2.3.

#### 2. TRINITARIAN DEVELOPMENT FROM NICAEA (AD 325) TO CONSTANTINOPLE (AD 381)

In the decades that followed the Council of Nicaea, the Eastern church was dissatisfied with the Nicene Creed which seemed in their way of thinking to make the Father and the Son the same person. Moreover, Arianism had gained new ground, often with political power. In spite of various exiles and anathemas against him, Athanasius fought tirelessly for



the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, while others began to study more deeply the Scriptures as well. Three of these in the East are known as the Cappadocian fathers who began to articulate the full personal deity of the Holy Spirit as well as that of the Son (“of the same essence,” Gk. *homoousion/s*, as the Father). Likewise Western fathers such as Ambrose of Milan and Hilary of Poitiers returned to the Bible itself to reaffirm the full deity of Jesus Christ. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 the Eastern and Western church reconvened to amplify and fine-tune the language of Nicaea. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed more forcefully than ever declared the three “persons” (or Gk. *hypostases*) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as each fully and equally God, yet there is but one God. This refined Creed is usually simply called the Nicene Creed.

Again, see the Nicene Creed in Part 2.3.

### 3. FROM TRINITY TO FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOD-MAN JESUS CHRIST

As in the NT, the Eastern fathers tended to begin with the three divine persons in relationship to one another. The unity of the Godhead was confessed not only as oneness of “nature” (Gk. *ousia*) but also relational unity of the three together. Precisely how that unity exists was left in “mystery” (Gk. *apophasis*). Furthermore, the Eastern church defended the primacy of God the Father as the origin of all existence, even from whom the Son is “eternally begotten” and the Spirit “eternally proceeds.” Nevertheless each member of the Godhead is confessed equally and eternally God. As Eastern theology developed, the term *perichoresis* came to describe the mutual indwelling of each member of the Godhead in the other. Thus, for those in East the unity of the Holy Trinity is one of personal interrelationality, although a mysterious unity of essence is also affirmed. In the West, it is especially Augustine (d. 430) who stressed the one “substance” of God; this one divine essence was understood as existing in three eternal “subsistencies”—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine favored various psychological models as expressive of the threeness of God, reasoning that man is made in the image of God. In his way of thinking, however, the Holy Spirit is described as the love that proceeds from the Father and the Son to each other; thus the Spirit appears diminished in his full personality. In the following centuries, the West continued to prioritize the divine essence and lists of attributes, while the East emphasized the three persons in perichoretic, mystical unity.

While the full deity of Jesus Christ was affirmed at Nicea and Constantinople, the nature of his humanity was not. Apollinarius argued that Jesus was God in his higher soul and human only in his human passions and bodily form. Gregory of Nazianzus responded that what the Son did not assume (or “become”) is not healed; that is, the Son’s full incarnation is essential for the salvation of the whole person. Nestorius and Eutyches argued respectively for either excessive division or intermingling of Christ’s two natures; both were rejected at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

### 4. THE ATHANASIAN CREED

One of the clearest, most beautiful statements of the Trinity is the Athanasian Creed. While not an official document of the universal (or ecumenical or catholic) councils, the Athanasian Creed seems named in honor of Athanasius, the great defender of Trinitarian doctrine. Used as a Western catechism from about 450 onward, its usefulness continues today:

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [universal] faith, which except everyone shall have kept whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish eternally. Now the catholic faith is this: We worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit; the Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated; the Father is infinite, the Son is infinite, and the Holy Spirit is infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet there are not three eternals but one eternal, as also not three infinities, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one infinite.

So, likewise, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty; and yet not three almighties but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be both God and Lord; so are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there be three Gods or three Lords.

The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father not three Fathers, one Son not three Sons, and one Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits.

And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity is to be worshiped. He therefore who wills to be in a state of salvation, let him think thus of the Trinity."

## THE HOLY TRINITY IN LIFE

**DEFINITION. THE TRINITY: GOD ETERNALLY EXISTS AS THREE PERSONS, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AND EACH PERSON IS FULLY GOD, AND THERE IS ONE GOD."**

**HOW DOES BELIEF IN THE TRINITY CHANGE THE WAY WE UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING ELSE?**

UNDERSTANDING WHO GOD IS WILL DEFINE WHY YOU AND I EXIST, WHO WE ARE AS PERSONS, AND HOW WE MAY MOST BE FULFILLED INDIVIDUALLY AND IN RELATIONSHIP TO OUR CREATOR, OTHER PERSONS, AND THE NATURAL WORLD.

### 1. GOD BEFORE CREATION

**WHY IS THERE SOMETHING INSTEAD OF NOTHING?**

Before any and all creation, God was completely self-sufficient and all-inclusive. All that existed was God. Without beginning, God exists eternal, forever choosing to be himself and forever freely expressive of his nature. Hippolytus: "Though alone, he was multiple."

**HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW OF GOD?**

Each divine person is a center of consciousness and shares in the fullness of the divine attributes. Yet each also freely indwells and is indwelled by the others. Thus the unity of the one God is dynamic and profoundly interpersonal, as well as mysteriously one.

## 2. TRINITY AND CREATION

God created something out of nothing. He is not creation. Creation is not an extension of God. He creates it, he is present in it, he sustains it. But God is not mixed with his creation. He is separate from his creation. All space, energy, matter, and time as we know it exist as God's creation and artistry, not as his essence. Nature exists not by necessity but by grace. This gives reason for science, the objective study of nature. By understanding God's creation, we rightly should worship the Creator.

### WHY DID GOD CREATE?

## 3. TRINITY AND OTHER PERSONS. WHAT IS A PERSON MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE?

Who God is helps define who you and I are as Persons. What we see in the real humanity of Jesus Christ corresponds to the way God has made us all.

### A. *A Person Is an Individual Made in the Image of God.*

As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we, too, think, act, have emotions.

For example, we see a fullness of emotion in the Trinity; joy in heaven, Jesus' sadness, anger, joy; we can grieve the Holy Spirit. We are made too for emotions.

We have a conscience (though sinful). We know some right from wrong. Guilt.

We create. We learn to master certain things (dominion).

We have a sense of afterlife, eternity. We have a beginning but we never cease to exist.

We want to have relationships, we want to be loved. God made us social like is Trinity.

Therefore, EVERY person has importance before our Lord. Every person, young or old, poor or rich, sick or healthy, orphan or with family, black or white, unborn or adult. There is no caste with God. There is no karma with God. With God there are no little people. Every person has dignity because they are made in God's image and for God himself.

### B. *A Person Is Defined in Community with Others.*

Even alone we are still created in God's image, but we are also defined by our relationship to other persons:

- (1) First with our Creator, God himself. This is the most relationship of important of all. We are made to be indwelled by God. (There is a chasm we cannot cross because of our sin. Only in Jesus Christ does God provide a way of salvation.) As each member of the Trinity indwells the other, we are made so that the Lord can live within us. This happens at the moment of saving faith, trusting in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. And so, the Christian becomes the temple of God. Christ is in us. The Spirit indwells us. We are made for him. For this reason we preach the gospel.

(2) Second, we are defined in relationship with other people:

**HOW ARE WE AS INDIVIDUAL PERSONS DEFINED BY OUR SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS?**

God does not intend for us to be separated from others. But our Lord requires that he be first. He calls for faithfulness and obedience. Jesus spoke of others being poor. But although the disciples had left everything to follow him, he taught them that they were children of God, above all distinctions. The heavenly Father will care for us.

#### 4. TRINITY AND OUR SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

We are not three persons, we are one person. We need others. We are created for relationships. First the Lord. We also need family, friendships, others in the local church. We even need society. Christian faith proclaims that communication, friendship, love—all personal activities—assume profound meaning with one another in relation to the Tripersonal God. In the biblical worldview, we as human beings—individually and socially—fit within the order of creation. In Trinitarian theology, our humanity has found a home.

##### A. *Trinity and Marriage*

The beauty of unity and diversity in love, modeled by the Trinity itself.

(1) Equality of Male and Female. Gen 1:26-28; \*Gal 3:26, 28. Just as the Spirit and the Son are equally God as is the Father, so both men and women are created in the image of God and equals through faith in Christ. God gives all spiritual gifts. Neither is independent (1 Cor 11:11).

(2) Order in Marriage. Gen 2:18-24; \*1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:22-32; 1 Pet 3:1-7. As in the Holy Trinity, with equality there is also order with the headship, leadership and love of the husband and the respect and submission of the wife. In the Bible, how gender order is expressed in different cultures may vary (1Co 11:10); but the principle is to be practiced in obedience to God.

(3) Mutual Sacrifice and Submission. \*Eph 5:1-2, 20-21 “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ”.

MARITAL AND FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS  
 MODELED AFTER THE TRINITY  
 Making the Other Known  
 Communicating with Each Other  
 Enjoying Friendship (*Koinonia*) with the Other  
 Audible Expressions of Love to the Other  
 Expressing Pleasure with or Desire to Please the Other  
 Giving Gifts  
 Honoring the Other  
 Working with and for One Another  
 Sending, Giving Responsibility to the Other  
 Submitting to the Will of the Other  
 Abiding in Unity  
 Being a Part of Each Other (*Perichoresis*)  
 Trusting in the Midst of Suffering



(4) Sexuality. Reflection of the *spiritual*, mutual indwelling within the triune God (*perichoresis*), God created human beings with a similar capacity to indwell and be indwelled by another through the act of sexual intercourse. From the very beginning (Gen 2:24-25), God created Adam and Eve and encouraged their oneness of flesh within the bond of marriage. Sexual intimacy is reserved for covenantal relationship with another. For this reason, sexuality is sacred and to be guarded for marriage. Although Satan has perverted this image, it serves as an analogy for spiritual oneness, Christ with the church, and the Holy Trinity each indwelling the other.

B. *Trinity and Family*. Similar to equality and difference between the husband and wife, so within the family. The child is equally human in God's image. Their care is God's privilege allotted to us by God. As Joseph and Mary, Jesus' human parents, our greatest goal is to nurture our children to trust and obey the heavenly Father.

**WHAT CAN WE LEARN (AS EARLIER) OF THE EXAMPLE OF GOD THE FATHER?**

**WHAT ARE WAYS THAT THE TRINITY DOES NOT MODEL FAMILY FOR US? HOW CAN IT BE UNHEALTHY TO DRAW TOO CLOSE OF PARALLEL BETWEEN FAMILY AND THE TRINITY?**

C. *Trinity and the Local Church*

The local church is the collective image of God. God's people are to reflect the triune God. As in the fellowship of the Trinity, so in the local church there should be unity and diversity, mutuality and order. The biblical term *koinonia* (fellowship) is used of the believer's relationship to God, to spouse, and to others in the local church. It signifies deep, transparent communion. The local church should foster deep (appropriate) friendships in the bonds of Christ.

**HOW SHOULD THE LOCAL CHURCH REFLECT THE TRINITY?**

(1) In our relationships with one another?

(2) In our worship services as a church?

(3) In our leadership in the church?

Church structures through history have tended to follow political structures (monarchies, dictatorships, democracies, etc. Too often pastors either rule with an iron hand, or don't much lead at all. What does it mean to be *pastors*, shepherds?

How do we train up others around us? How do we view the young people?

Do we try to do everything ourselves? Are we afraid others will try to take over?

What is the place of authority for leaders, such as in church discipline?

(4) God's Self-giving leadership and ours. Before creation God was all-glorious. There was need of nothing. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could have stayed and enjoyed one another without ever bothering to create the universe, much less to plan redemption through the incarnation and the crucifixion of the Son. Yet our Lord is the self-giving God. Irenaeus (AD 190) called the Son and the Spirit the two hands (or arms) of God reaching out to our sinful world.

So in the local church. We can become comfortable and just enjoy ourselves. There are selfish churches. Nearly all activities orient to themselves. But God has designed us that we must give of ourselves to others to continue healthy and alive as a church (and as individuals). We cease to be his image without sacrifice in obedience to God and in love for the lost. Just as God did not keep to himself as Trinity but created and entered the world, so the local church must care for one another (fellowship) but also give itself for the Lord to the world in order to show his grace to others. As a fire that burns, so a church lives by mission.

#### D. *Trinity and the Worldwide Body of Christ*

**WHAT OFTEN NEGATIVELY MARKS THE WAY CHRISTIANS TREAT ONE ANOTHER?**

**HOW MIGHT UNDERSTANDING THE TRINITY INFLUENCE OUR VIEW OF OTHER GOSPEL-PREACHING CHURCHES?**

**HOW DO WE GET ALONG WITH OTHER PASTORS AND LEADERS? IS THERE NEED FOR ASKING FORGIVENESS?**



Just as the Godhead is diverse, so the worldwide body of Christ has different expressions of worship, etc. Whether cross-denominationally or across the world, the real church is the Body of Christ. We must care for rather than compete with one another as churches.

#### E. *Trinity and Society*

How does being Christian and Trinitarian apply in society?

- (1) *Compassion.* We should genuinely care about all people: the idolater, the sinful person, the religious Muslim or Hindu. We seek the well-being of all people. If Christ gave his life for us, we are called to be sacrificial people in love for others.
- (2) *Proclamation of the Gospel.* We should share the gospel. By his Spirit, God's word speaks to those he has chosen. We are to be faithful. We are to be seed-sowers of the good news of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ.
- (3) *Justice.* God hates injustice. If we hate evil and wrong suffering, God hates it worse. Even in a corrupt society, Christians should be on the forefront of declaring right

- and wrong—of seeking *public* justice in society, while showing *personal* mercy and forgiveness. This is not easy, especially where Christians are a minority.
- (4) *Freedom*. While we await Christ's return and his Kingdom, we should encourage freedom of religion. God gives the world choice. We must allow and encourage that as well. Religious law does not make truly righteous people, only outward conformity.
- (5) *Unity and Diversity*. There must be order in society (not caste). Jesus and Paul commanded us to obey those in authority above us (unless they require our doing wrong). We should do so for Christ's sake.

## 5. THE HOLY TRINITY, LOVE, AND FORGIVENESS. MISSION DEI

### A. *The Problem of Holiness*

The Maker of the Universe, the triune God, is the Center of everything ever created. All things are designed to show forth his glory. God is holy, pure, righteous, just. He is the Lord Chief Justice, the Moral Absolute of all existence. This means that nothing contrary to his perfectly holy nature can be dismissed. God cannot forgive without violating his own just nature. This is a serious problem for some religions. If God forgives anyone, anything, then he is no longer the Moral Absolute of the Universe. Such a God is not big enough to be God. Logically such a God can neither forgive nor show mercy to a sinful humanity.

### B. *The Problem of God as Loving and Merciful*

Along with being holy, God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love by definition (biblical definition) is goodwill toward another. Love only for oneself is "selfishness," "egocentrism." Mercy and compassion are expressions (corollaries) of love. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Richard of St. Victor wrote:

It is never said of anyone that he possesses charity [love] because of the exclusively personal love that he has for himself. For there to be charity, there must be a love that is directed toward another. Consequently, where there is an absence of plurality of persons, there cannot be charity. [*De Trinitate*, 1.20]

For God to be love from before creation, God must be at least two persons. Otherwise God would have had to create something to love. But God is not dependent on creation to be fulfilled. God is eternal Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in love, in glorifying the other, in mutual self-giving and in infinite joy is completely fulfilled in the Godhead. God is infinitely personal, infinitely holy, infinitely love.

### C. *How Can God Be Infinitely Holy Yet Forgive?*

(1) A Single-Personed God. If God were one person, he could be perfectly just but would be unable to forgive. If he forgives he is no longer perfectly just. If he does *not* forgive then he may be just, but he cannot be compassionate, merciful, and forgiving. If God is only one person, then claiming such a God is both just and forgiving contradicts what is possible. God becomes arbitrary in justice and arbitrary in forgiveness. Such a God cannot be perfect in either. There can be no certainty of salvation, indeed no possibility whatsoever of peace and joy in before God in this life. Much less a genuine relationship with this God. Moreover, if one never can be sure if God forgives, then it is very hard to forgive others. If there is no basis in God himself for true forgiveness, then how do I forgive another?

(2) *Missio Dei*: the holy, loving triune God. Because God is Trinity, God can be both the “JUST and the JUSTIFIER of all who have faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). All have sinned, as even the most “holy” of religious leaders will admit. Though created for fellowship with God, we are all alienated and under the damnation of his justice. Only God himself can pay the infinite price of what he requires to satisfy his holiness and justice. So God became man, in Jesus’ own words, “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Because Jesus Christ is both God and man, his death on the cross has infinite value for all who trust him.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. [1 John 4:8-10]

For God so love the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. [John 3:16-18]

The mission of God into the world is to pay the price for our sin so that God’s holiness be satisfied and so that his love, grace, and mercy be made clear to humankind. We are invited through faith to know this God. Jesus is the substitute, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Through him we are reconciled to God, given eternal life, made spiritual sons and daughters, given victory over sin, death, and Satan.

## CONCLUSION

The understanding of God as Trinity is what brings together the rich complexity of God’s own revelation in Jesus Christ, Scripture, Christian experience, and human and cosmic history. The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally true to God, and true to everything in God’s creation. God as Trinity is the center of everything.

We might say that God is everywhere creation is not. For those who are Christians, redeemed by Christ’s death at Calvary, finite creation constitutes an enormous crib over and around which the triune God hovers, affectionately caring for his own. All creation will someday recognize the greatness and beauty of God, together with the unfathomable debt it owes to the Almighty for its existence, preservation and provision of salvation in Jesus Christ. The deep understanding of our indebtedness to God may be our primary role as his creation in giving him glory.



Nevertheless, there is no more blessed glory than that glory given by one member of the Holy Trinity to the other, each wholly comprehending and exalting the magnificence of the other.