

The GLORY of the TRINITY

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By Dan Deckard

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The Biblical Reality of a Triune God

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September 18, 2005

Beginning this morning we are going to take a three-week journey into what is paradoxically the greatest mystery of all time, and yet something so real and necessary to our faith that it forms the only foundation for creation and salvation. I say it's paradoxical because, while it is a mystery, failure to grasp and believe this mystery at its basic level is failure to know God as he truly is and, therefore, undermine the salvation of your soul. Yet the more we traverse into this divine mystery, the more we come to the realization that our ability to reason, rationalize and categorize, becomes utterly insufficient to grasp its fullness. This great mystery, which is also our great foundation for creation and salvation, is the mystery of the Trinity.

It is a mystery in that the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to explain God as he himself is – the nature of his very being. The Trinity as concept breaks the boundaries of human logic and analogy. The best minds that human history has produced have confessed their inability to access or explain this great mystery. Jonathan Edwards, who wrote a brilliant essay on the Trinity, wrote, "I am far from pretending to explain the Trinity so as to render it no longer a mystery. I think it to be the highest and deepest of all Divine mysteries still, notwithstanding anything that I have said or conceived about it." A.W. Tozer wrote, "Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity must remain forever futile, and only by deepest reverence can it be saved from actual presumption." Every analogy, be it water existing as water, steam and ice, or the egg with shell, white and yoke all break down at some point, and in some measure distort what the Trinity actually is. In short, the doctrine of the Trinity takes us way beyond the bounds of human logic, our best wisdom, and any creaturely imagination. And we should be OK with that. In fact it should inspire us to worship, for as Tozer argues, without mystery there is no worship. If we, as humans can't grasp how the universe began or holds together from a scientific perspective, how do we ever think we'll grasp the boundless nature of infinite deity? That God can't be figured out should be a cause for worship!

Yet, while the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, it is also the foundation stone upon which Christianity rests. For in the doctrine of the Trinity is implied the divinity of Christ, the glory of God, the self-sufficiency of God and the salvation of mankind. R.B. Kuiper was right when he said, "The doctrine of the Trinity is basic to the Christian religion. It is no exaggeration to assert that the whole of Christianity stands or falls with it."

If you take a moment to think about it, you'll realize that the doctrine of the Trinity is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. Islam, Judaism and Jehovah's Witness affirm that there is one God and that God is only one person. They have no place for plurality or community within God. And in so doing, Jesus is stripped of his divinity and salvation is torn apart. On the other end there's Mormon theology that affirms the divinity of Jesus as one god among many. Thus, there are many gods, not one.

Christianity has uniquely and necessarily kept the oneness of God and the threeness of God mysteriously bound together. And in doing so, the biblical witness is maintained, the glory of God is upheld, the divinity of Jesus is preserved, the self-sufficiency within God himself is maintained, and the framework of salvation is upheld. This, of course, means that this daunting

topic of the Trinity is of the utmost importance for us to understand to the best of our finite abilities, and in understanding to protect, affirm and worship our God.

The central task in what follows is threefold: first, to simply state what the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is; second, to show the biblical foundations of this doctrine; and third, to show the importance of the Trinity for us.

I. The Orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity.

Though the word Trinity is not found in the scripture it is a necessary word because it captures the essence of what the Bible teaches about God and protects us from distortion and heresy. The word is a compound of two words *tri* (three) and *unus* (one). Thus, the word means three in one and preserves the unity and the plurality of God in one word. Tertullian in the 2nd century was the first person to use the word *trinitas* to refer to both the unity and plurality of God.

So what is the Trinity? Succinctly stated, the doctrine of the Trinity asserts that, *there is one God who eternally and simultaneously exists in three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and that each person is equally and fully God.*

This definition doesn't explain the Trinity but it does frame it and preserve it and protect it against distortion. It protects us against the heresy of Mormon doctrine that there are many gods – Jesus being one and the father being another. It protects us against the heresy of Modalism which says that there is one God who simply put on his “Father hat,” took it off and put on his “Son hat,” took it off to later put on the “Holy Spirit hat” – asserting that there is simply one God who changes modes. This affirms oneness but denies plurality. The doctrine of the Trinity, on the other hand, preserves the fact that God is one with three distinct persons. Or put differently, that there are three distinct persons or personalities united in the same divine essence, agreement and purpose. They are distinct personalities in that the Father is not the Son (i.e. the Father did not die on the cross), the Son is not the Spirit and the Spirit is not the Son. They are distinctive (something we'll look at in part 3), yet one. As to how the Trinity works and what does it look like? We don't know and I don't know that we ever will. At the end of the day the Trinity is a mystery. But this doctrine best preserves what the Bible does teach on the nature of God. It is to the Bible that we now turn.

II. The Biblical Foundations of the Trinity

I realize that for some of you this may seem basic – you've heard it before. However, there are those here for whom this doctrine is relatively new and need to hear it. And second, it's a doctrine that we need to be capable of articulating and defending at the blink of an eye. We should, at the drop of a hat, be able to provide a biblical support for this doctrine and why it's of such great importance.

From the beginning to the end of the Bible we read that God is one (monotheistic).

Deuteronomy 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

1 Kings 8:60 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other.

Isaiah 44:6 "This is what the LORD says-- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.

Isaiah 45:5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.... I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, ⁶ so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting, men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Isaiah 45:21 Declare what is to be, present it-- let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.²² "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus....

Romans 3:30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

1 Corinthians 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder.

At this point we can affirm wholeheartedly without reservation that there is one God and there is no other. This is what we believe! Our faith rests on the fact that there is one God! Yet, the Bible also reveals that there is plurality, or community within God. Through the entire Bible this is shown to be true. It is hinted at repeatedly in the Old Testament and made explicitly clear in the new. Beginning in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible God says:

Genesis 1:26 ... "Let us [plural] make man in our [plural] image, in our [plural] likeness..."

Then in verse 27 how does the "us" make man? God makes man male and female [plural]. The "us" (plural) of verse 26 makes man (plural) in verse 27 to reflect his image. Some have tried to argue that plural "let us" in reference to God is the plural of majesty – as a king might say, "We have decreed such and such." However, in the "Hebrew Old Testament there are no other examples of a monarch using plural verbs or plural pronouns of himself in such a 'plural of majesty.'"¹ Thus, the evidence for such an interpretation is entirely lacking. Could the "us" refer to angels? Not likely, since angels did not participate in the creation of mankind. Therefore, the best interpretation suggests that in some manner there is some kind of community within God! And so it continues throughout Genesis.

Genesis 3:22 And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.

Genesis 11:7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

This inference of plurality continues to pepper the rest of the Old Testament in too many places to recount. A quick sample will prove this is true!

¹ Don Garlington, "Biblical Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity", Reformation and Revival Journal, 10:3 (Summer 2001) p. 18.

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

Psalm 45:6 Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. ⁷ You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

This, psalm is especially noteworthy because the psalmist is speaking to God and saying, "Therefore God, your God" suggesting plurality.

Psalm 110:1 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

Isaiah 63:10 Yet they rebelled and grieved his [God's] Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 48:16 And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit.

Hosea 1:7 Yet I [God speaking] will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them-- not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God."

Daniel 7:13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

All of these suggest that there is plurality within the one God. And by the time we get to the New Testament, what was hinted at in the Old becomes patently clear in statements like, "In the beginning was the Word [eternal], and the Word was with God [distinctiveness], and the Word was God [unity]" (John 1:1). Jesus prays, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began [eternal]" (John 17:5). We are commanded to make disciples and baptize in the name of the "Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We see each of the members of the Trinity simultaneously working in the baptism of Jesus when the, "heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven [the Father] said, "This is my Son [Jesus], whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Thus, the three are distinctive, eternal and exist simultaneously.

Further, as one studies the Father and the Son and the Spirit, it is crystal clear that each is presented as fully divine (which I don't have time here to go into). In addition, each of them is referred to in the Bible as personal. We can grieve and lie to the Holy Spirit, which means he is a person. Jesus listens to and intercedes for us, which means he's a person. The Father holds us in his hand, we call him Abba, he cares for our needs, all of which imply personhood.

So, when you take what the Scripture says about God and put it together, you get one God existing simultaneously and eternally in three distinct persons – the Triune God! To say otherwise is to compromise the witness of Scripture for the sake of pacifying human logic.

That said, why is the Trinity foundational? Why is it something we dare not compromise or negotiate?

III. The Importance of the Trinity.

There are numerous reasons as to why the doctrine of the Trinity is important, but let me give three.

A. The Trinity preserves the glory of God's self-sufficiency.

I've heard the question asked, "Why did God create us?" (an extremely important question). And the answer often given is, "so he could fellowship with us." I've never liked that answer because it portrays God as a lonely, solitary figure who needed someone to talk to. Did he need to create Dan Deckard so he could have fellowship? Was God lonely? I think most of us, through both reason and experience, would have to say that companionship is more glorious than isolation. I met an older gentleman in Pennsylvania who has lost his wife of many years and was living alone in a large house – no one to talk to and no one to love or offer love. And quite honestly, I felt sorry for him because of his isolation.

Brothers and Sisters, our God is not a solitary being who needed to create us to have someone to talk to. He was never lonely! Our God exists in perfect, eternal community within himself. The Father rejoices and overflows with love for the Son and the Son rejoices and overflows with love for the Father! Creation is not a result of God needing us, creation is a result of the overflowing love God has within the Trinity itself! Creation happened because of the Trinity's inter-divine love for one another! God is not lacking, he's overflowing! He is utterly self-sufficient, self-satisfied, independent, and free from any need – because our one God exists in community with himself. The glory of God's self-sufficiency is at stake in the Trinity!

B. The Trinity makes salvation possible.

In order for the logic of salvation to work the Trinity must be true. The Bible teaches us that Christ came down to take upon himself the penalty of our sins. That is, he endured the wrath of God that we deserved and in doing so satisfied justice! How can wrath be poured out, and wrath be received by one person? It can't! The Father (first member of the Trinity) poured out his wrath at the crucifixion, and the Son (the second member of the Trinity) endured it. Atonement requires plurality within God – one judges, the other is judged. Moreover, if Jesus is not a member of the Trinity, how could he ever satisfy the wrath of God for so many people and so many sins! The only way atonement can be accomplished is if Christ is a part of the Godhead. So the truth of the matter is, no Trinity, no salvation. That's why the truth of the Trinity is a non-negotiable for the Christian church.

As a side note, I once conversed with a Mormon elder (a nice, well-meaning person) who told me that his church and my church essentially believe the same thing. He even showed me his doctrinal statement which had many similar beliefs. But something was missing – a gaping hole that tells me we aren't even in the same ballpark. I said, where's the doctrine of the Trinity? - to which there was no reply! Salvation is at stake in this doctrine, which is precisely why it's so important

C. The Trinity is the foundation and model of true community

The more I've studied the Bible and contemplated the Trinity, the more I'm absolutely convinced that living in Christian community with one another is central to our calling. Just as God created man both male and female to express the communal love of the Trinity, so he has called us into his eternal family as a church to express the communal love of the Trinity! Jesus

prays, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one...” (John 17:22). Our unity as a body in loving relationship with Christ and one another reveals and expresses the loving unity of the Father and Son! The church is a living expression of the triune God! That shows me how important true biblical, Christ-centered, loving community is to God! It’s an expression of the very nature of our God – the three in one.

As we’ve seen, the import of the Trinity is vast beyond imagination. It is filled with beauty, love and glory! It is the ground of creation and the foundation of our salvation! All we can really do in response is believe, rejoice and worship the great Triune God!

Soli Deo Gloria

A Triune Covenant Before Time

By D.L. Deckard

September 25, 2005

I was reading this past week about where our solar system is located in our galaxy, the Milky Way, and was struck once again by sheer magnitude of space. Astronomers tell us that the Milky Way is roughly 100,000 light years across. It’s a spiral galaxy that spins and has these great arms that stretch out tens of thousands of light years. We might think that since earth is so important it would be near the center of this great galactic expanse of billions of stars. But what’s amazing is it’s not. We’re near the tail end of what they call the Orion Arm which means we’re on the outskirts of our galaxy. In fact, if we got into a space ship and flew the speed of light toward the center of our galaxy it would take us 28,000 years to get there. Along the way we’d pass the stars of the constellation Sagittarius one by one. And by the time we got to the center of the Milky Way we’d all be 28,000 years older! That’s a long trip. And what would we find at the center of the Milky Way? What’s at the center of this revolving mass which will take 220 million years just to make one single orbit? Scientists don’t know. They hypothesize that at its center is perhaps a black hole or perhaps more than one. But what’s *really* at the center is a dark mystery that holds all this mass in orbit.

What intrigues me about this is how small and insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. We’re just a small part of something far bigger than we know – we’re like the outer winds of a mighty and massive hurricane that orbits around one mysterious center. And our great galaxy, they say, is part of an even larger swirling mass of galaxies that move in concert around something else. What is it? What’s at the center? Those thoughts and reflections blow my mind and cause me to wonder! They show me how insignificant I am in the grand scheme of things.

In what follows I would like us to take a journey together in the Scripture to consider a far bigger, more profound mystery - the mystery of what’s at the center of everything – creation, the universe, the crucifixion, the resurrection, our salvation... everything, absolutely everything! I’ll admit up front that we once again encounter mystery. But the Scripture, like a telescope, gives us a peek at its wonders.

In the previous study we explored the reality and the glory of the *Trinity* – the glorious truth that there is one God who simultaneously exists as three distinctive persons. In this study we consider another glory of the Trinity and that is *covenant*.

We've heard or read of God making covenants with man (a covenant being something that contains agreement, promises and responsibilities – similar to a marriage ceremony when two parties make promises and vows to one another). We know that salvation happened because God made a covenant promise to Abraham. So salvation comes out of God's covenanting. We knew that an eternal king would come because God made a covenant promise to David. Thus, Jesus' coming and dying was because God covenanted with mankind. But what's behind God's covenanting with man? What's at the center? In answer to this, as we peer through the Scripture into the center of the spiritual universe, into timeless eternity of God's being, we find at the center – *covenant*. It's what made creation happen. It's what made salvation happen. Covenant! But this covenant is not a covenant with man. Rather, it is a covenant within the Trinity itself. Before creation ever existed God covenanted with himself to create and to save. This covenant has been referred to as the *covenant of redemption* by some, or the *eternal covenant* by others (the latter is the way I'll refer to it). In a nutshell, it's the idea that before time began, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit covenanted together in perfect agreement and harmony to create and redeem – each person with his own distinctive responsibilities and roles. And it's this covenant that is at the center of all things. Everything else spins out in orbit around this inter-Trinitarian covenant.

It may sound like deep theology, which it is. It may sound irrelevant, which it's not. But what I love most about this doctrine is that it is filled with the immeasurable glory of God and has huge implications for how we view him and ourselves.

So, in what follows I would like to accomplish two things: 1.) to explore what the Bible teaches about this covenant within God himself; and 2.) to flesh out some of the implications of it. I should mention as well that while the Spirit is part of this covenant, I will be focusing more narrowly on the covenant between the Father and the Son.

I. Exploring the eternal covenant of God.

While there are a number of passages that reflect this doctrine, I will focus primarily on John 17 where it is the most pervasive. However, I would like to enter John 17 through Titus 1:1-2. And let me simply say, by way of encouragement, that if you can hang with me through the biblical part of it I believe you'll see and feel the glory of the Trinity! In a manner of speaking, we're going to be ascending into the Himalayas of biblical doctrine to see amazing views of God's glory. But we must work in the climb to see the view! In Titus 1 we read:

Titus 1:1 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness-- ² a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,

A. The Promise

Paul opens this letter to a young man named Titus by affirming what his apostleship was all about. It was about the faith of God's elect (chosen people); about true knowledge of God that leads to right living all of which is based on the hope of eternal life. So in the opening lines, Paul affirms that a chosen people have received the hope of eternal life. But then he goes on to

say, that this eternal hope for a chosen people was promised by God before the beginning of time. It's right here we need to ask a couple of questions. First, to whom was this promise made? The text is mysteriously silent. God made a promise to someone before time began. A related question might be asked, Who was there to receive the promise before time began? I certainly wasn't there and neither were you! And you should note that the word promise is covenant language. God made a promise to someone that a chosen people would receive eternal life. I would argue that this promise was made by God the Father to the Son. That is, he promised the Son eternal life for his chosen people.

It becomes clear as we move from this verse into John 17 where Jesus prays his final prayer prior to the crucifixion. And this prayer gives us a profound look at the relationship between the Father and the Son.

B. The Gift

If you read through the passage you'll quickly realize that the Father has given something to the Son. The Son then takes the gift and accomplishes the will of the Father for this gift. What is this gift? It's us – a chosen people. Consider the repetition of the word "given" in this prayer as to what the Father has given to the Son.

- **John 17:1** After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.
- **John 17:6** "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.
- **John 17:9** I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.
- **John 17:24** "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

C. The Responsibilities

The Father has given a chosen people, a kingdom of priests, to the Son – a gift. And with this gift the Father assigned the Son responsibilities with this gift. We read of these responsibilities in various parts of the chapter:

- **John 17:3** Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.
- **John 17:4** I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.
- **John 17:6** "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.
- **John 17:8** For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them.

Here we see that not only has the Father given an eternal people to his Son, but assigned the Son a role to play in their eternal salvation. The Father sends the Son and the Son voluntarily and willingly comes. The Father gives the Son a work to do (the work of redemption) and the Son voluntarily and willingly completes this work. The Father has sent

the Son to reveal himself, and the Son voluntarily and willingly comes and reveals the Father, giving the people the words God gave the Son. All of this implies covenant - promises are made, roles and responsibilities are assigned. There is submission and agreement between the Father and Son.

Thus, we see the Father giving an eternal people to the Son. And we see, the Son in submission to the Father comes, lives, teaches, guards, dies and rises to save these chosen people. 1 Corinthians 15:23 goes one step further telling us that after the Son receives this eternal people (us) he turns around and gives it back to the Father. For there Paul writes:

- **1 Corinthians 15:24** Then the end will come, when he [the Son] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

D. The Purpose

In short, you have this gift exchange between the Father and the Son! And we are that gift, a chosen people. At this point we might ask, for what purpose? Here again, John 17 gives a crystal clear answer – GLORY! The Father gives a chosen people to the Son to glorify him! And the Son saves these people to glorify the Father!

- **John 17:1** After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.
- **John 17:4** I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.
- **John 17:5** And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.
- **John 17:10** All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.
- **John 17:24** "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory....

What's going on here is unbelievable! The Father has given a people to the Son, assigned the Son the task of coming down and giving his life for them so that the Son might be glorified by them! The Father wanted his Son to be put on display, for him to be exalted, lifted up, praised forever and ever and ever! He gave his Son a people who would gaze forever upon the beauty of his glory and enjoy him forever without end. Rufus Williams pointed this out in his masterful message entitled "The Christ-centeredness of God". But the opposite is also true – the complete Father-centeredness of Christ. Jesus prays, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you! In the work of Christ, the Son brings the Father glory! His sole aim is to see the Father glorified, lifted up, exalted, praised and enjoyed forever and ever, amen!

E. The Motivation

And what is the motivation behind this covenanted gift exchange? Unfathomable, unsearchable and infinite love! Why does the Father give his Son a chosen people to glorify him and gaze upon his beauty?

- **John 17:24** "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

And what motivates the Son to obey and glorify the Father?

- **John 14:31** ... the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

Are you starting to see the big picture? Salvation is a result of an infinite love affair between the Father and the Son. The Father delights in his Son so fully and infinitely that he creates and chooses a people to praise him forever. The Son delights in his Father so fully and infinitely that he humbled himself taking the form of man, suffering and dying for the people so he could glorify his Father... and eventually give the gift back! And we're caught in the middle of a Trinitarian love affair! We brothers and sisters are the love gift between them! Their covenant love for one another produced people to share in their infinite love! That's awesome! That's too high, wide and deep to understand! This is the eternal covenant of love within God himself!

II. Applying the eternal covenant of God

What does this glorious truth have to do with us? Everything! It changes our whole perspective on things – at least it does me.

A. God's love with and for himself is the cause of creation and salvation, not his love for me.

This is not to say that God does not deeply love us. But it does say that God does not love us primarily or ultimately. Ultimately, God created us and saved us because the Father so loved the Son and the Son so loved the Father that they covenanted together to create, redeem and bless a chosen people. You see, our salvation is a result of God's love for God (the reciprocal love of Father and Son).

It's a bit analogous to marriage and children. I married my wife because her beauty inside and outside utterly swept me off my feet. I was compelled by her beauty to pursue her. And apparently she saw something of worth in me. And to demonstrate our love we covenanted together to remain faithful and exclusive in our love until death. And that love resulted in children – the last of which is on the way. My children spring forth from our marital love for one another! My children are the fruit of our love. My love for my children did not cause them to be born, it was my love for Deanna that produced my beloved children. And we made a conscious choice early in our marriage that our kids would not be the center of our family. My children know that my wife is number one, and she always will be. I love my children deeply, but mom's number one. Someday they will leave – and I'll still be with the love of my heart!

It was the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father that overflowed in creating us as a love gift between them. You see, at the end of the day it's not about us! At the center of the spiritual galaxy is the radiant, glowing covenantal love within God himself.

This helps protect us against the carnal tendency of placing ourselves at the center of all God's action – as if it's all about us! We think that Jesus died ultimately because we matter that much to God. Jesus died, brothers and sisters, because the Father mattered that much to Jesus. We're caught up in something infinitely greater and more central than just us!

And yet, God does greatly love us for the fact that we are an expression of their infinite love, and amazingly enough graced with the priceless privilege of entering into the love of the Trinity – and gazing forever at the glory of the Son and the Father! We’re caught up in something immense, glorious and astounding!

B. We can rest confidently knowing that our salvation is safely anchored in God’s covenant of love with himself.

The eternal security of our souls ultimately rests not in what we do, but in the fact that the Father chose us before time began to be a special and eternal people for his Son. And we are secure in our salvation precisely because the Son has covenanted in love to the Father not to lose one of us that the Father has given to the Son. Their love for each other guarantees that we’ll enter the new creation and behold the face of God!

It’s somewhat analogous to the way in which my life was secure as a young boy knowing that we lived in the shelter of dad’s love for mom and my mom’s love for dad. We as children were living expressions of how much my dad loved my mom and my mom, my dad. And we were secure in that. Had my mom and dad broken up when I was a kid, stability and security would have been lost. I would have questioned their love for each other and hence questioned their love for me. Our souls are secure because we’re deeply anchored in the love of the Trinity.

C. We can worship a God who is infinitely more glorious and loving than we’ll ever know!

Sometimes the greatest application of a truth about God is simply the renewed awe and worship that arises when we peer into the center of the divine cosmos and see him for who he is – infinite, overflowing, worthy, perfect, infinite and beautiful.

Today, we see this glorious truth through a dark window, but one day we will see face to face. The Scripture, like a telescope, has shown us the glory at the center of all things. And at this glorious center is an eternal covenant of love between the three in one – the Trinity.

Soli Deo Gloria

The Roles and Relationships of the Trinity

D.L. Deckard

October 2, 2005

I want to begin by reflecting on the glory of three words: unity, diversity and harmony. Of course, the word unity implies oneness, the word diversity implies distinctiveness. And the word harmony implies orderliness. And if you think about it for a moment you'll realize why these three words – unity, diversity and harmony – are glorious when they exist together.

A baseball team is a single team – unity. Yet on a baseball team there are different players with different positions – diversity. And, when this unified team plays with its diverse members they are endeavoring to play an orderly integrated game – harmony. Harmony is when the team plays like a “well oiled machine.” But it's only when all three components are present – unity, diversity, in harmony – that you see glory. For example, you might have a unitary baseball team with a diversity of members, but if they don't play in harmony the game ends in tragedy.

Music is no different. You have one orchestra (unity) with different instruments (diversity), who are attempting to play in synchronized order (harmony). And when an orchestra plays Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in unity, diversity, playing in perfect harmony – it's pure

glory. No body is impressed when the first soprano is singing out of tune or the violin plays out of sequence and thus disrupts the harmony.

Nature is no different. The unitary ecosystem in which we exist is comprised of vast diversity of flowers, plants, animals, bacteria, water, wind and air, all of which have been designed to work in harmony – each playing its part. It's what makes nature glorious. It radiates with the glory of unity and diversity working in harmony. And when all three of these are present – unity, diversity, in harmony – it is beautiful and glorious. After all, creation would be boring if we had unity with no diversity of colors, textures, shapes, sizes, smells, tastes and so on.

The church is the same. God built the church with the same design of unity and diversity working in harmony. We are made one body, with diverse members and gifts who have been called to work in harmony with one another. And it's only as unity and diversity work in complete harmony that we see the glory of God shine in the church.

Marriage is glorious when the one flesh (unity) composed of two people of different genders (diversity) are living and relating to one another in perfect harmony. That's glorious.

The point is that all around us we see the glory and beauty of unity and diversity working in harmony. It's part of the fabric of creation. It's reflected in everything. But why? Where does this glory of unity and diversity working in harmony come from? I believe the Bible teaches that at the center of it all is God himself. The beauty and glory of the unity and diversity working in harmony that we see all around us is a reflection of the unity and diversity working in harmony within the nature of God himself - that at the center of God's being we find oneness (unity), threeness (diversity), relating and working in complete harmony, and it is glorious. And this glory is reflected and radiated in creation.

This morning is our last message on the glory of the Trinity in which we explore the diversity within the Trinity that works in perfect and beautiful harmony. In specific we're going to look at the diverse roles and relationships within the Trinity itself. And what we will find is that in the unity of God there is diversity that works in perfect and glorious harmony.

And once again, I think you'll see that this has huge implications for how we understand God, ourselves and our relationships. And if you haven't figured it out so far, the Trinity is at the core of all reality. And as such, the Trinity defines and clarifies everything else. Our understanding of marriage largely derives from our understanding of the Trinity. Our understanding of Christian community derives from our understanding of the Trinity. Our understanding of covenant, creation and salvation all find their core in the doctrine of the Trinity. It's bedrock.

Having said that, I would like us to consider two things: 1.) the roles and relationships of the Trinity; and 2.) the implications for our lives. As with last week, it's doctrine followed by application.

I. The Roles and Relationships of the Trinity

The focus text this morning will be Ephesians 1:3-14. In the English text it looks like a series of sentences. However, in the Greek text these 11 verses are one complete sentence. Talk about one long sentence – Paul just couldn't stop himself from talking about what the Trinity has done on our behalf.

As you read through this series of 11 verses, all three members of the Trinity come into play. In addition, what this text also makes clear is the respective roles that each member plays in the world.

A. The Roles of the Trinity

1. The Role of the Father

If you skim through these verses with a pencil in your hand you can easily mark the role of the Father in the world. Note the underlined sections below.

Ephesians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.... ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory....

These verses tell us that ultimately everything originates from the Father. He is the origin of everything. He is the one who chooses, blesses, predestines, gives us grace, makes known to us his will and brings all things “in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” The Father is the originator, the instigator or the author of creation and salvation. Ultimately he initiates it all.

And note that it’s all according to his, the Father’s, will. Three times the text affirms that it all happens, “according to his pleasure and will” (v. 5), “he made known to us the mystery of his will” (v. 9), and “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (v. 11). In a manner of speaking, the Father is the quarterback of the Trinity. He calls the plays and moves the game down the field. He’s the conductor of the Trinitarian symphony. He waves his hand and the music plays.

In addition, you’ll note that ultimately the Father initiates all of this for one express purpose, “to the praise of his glory” (repeated three times in 6, 12, 14).

So you see, the Father’s role is the ultimate cause and author of everything. It’s his will that enacts creation and salvation. The rest of the New Testament confirms this. Jesus says in John 6:38 “... I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” The Father is the source, the origin and the author of salvation. It ultimately comes from his initiation. That’s his role within the Trinity – the author, the quarterback, the conductor, and the architect of creation and salvation. That’s how the Bible presents him.

2. The Role of the Son

The Son, by contrast, is the means or the agent of creation and salvation. He is the one who carries out the plays of the quarterback. He’s the solo violinist who plays his part as the Father directs. Once again, when you read through this passage in Ephesians, you see that Jesus is the instrument God uses to save us.

Ephesians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ....¹¹ In him we were also chosen....¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation....

God blesses us “in Christ” and chooses us “in Christ,” He adopts us into his family “through Jesus Christ” and freely gives us grace “in the one he loves” and redeems us “through his blood.” He makes known the mystery of the Father’s will “in Christ” and included salvation “in Christ”.

Other Scriptures tell us that Jesus (the second member of the Trinity) was not only the instrumental means by which the Father accomplished salvation but also creation. “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities...”(Colossian 1:16).

So if the Father’s role is the author and architect of everything, Jesus’ role is the accomplisher or agent by which creation and salvation come. In a manner of speaking Jesus is the one who makes the touchdowns. Or in musical terms, he’s the one who makes the music. The Father authors and directs while the Son executes and accomplishes.

3. The Role of the Spirit

The Spirit also plays a vital, glorious and distinctive role within this Trinitarian team. At the end of this long sentence in Ephesians we read:

Ephesians 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.

There are two words in these last two verses that speak of the Spirit’s role in salvation, *seal* and *deposit*. A seal is something that an owner, in this case the Father, uses to do two things: show *ownership* and to *preserve*. The Spirit is placed in the believer showing that he or she is part of the family. The Spirit’s role is to make us part of the family of God. He’s the one who gives life to the soul, puts life back into dead bones, opens the heart, gives strength and awakens a new hunger and taste for God. The Spirit changes us into the image of Christ, and equips us for ministry within the family. He brings us into the family.

But he also preserves us in the family. A seal is something that is intended to also preserve something. So the Spirit’s role is to make us part of the family (and all that’s entailed in that) and his role is to preserve us in our faith. So in contrast to the Father and Son, the Spirit’s role is to apply what Christ did to our lives and preserve us in it.

But note that the Spirit also functions as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. And this part is unbelievable. All of us know about the concept of a deposit. It’s a preliminary down

payment. It's just a part guaranteeing that a whole lot more is coming. But a whole lot more of what? The simple answer, of course, is salvation. But at the center of salvation is the presence of God. As we saw last week in John 17:3 Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." And this knowing is intimate communion and relationship, for just a few verses later Jesus prays that, "They may be on as we are one: I in them and you in me..." (17:22-23). Here we might ask the question, how is Christ going to be in us? The consistent answer within the Gospel of John and the rest of the New Testament is through the Spirit of the living God – the third member of the trinity.

This is awesome if you think about it! God's grace not only promises that we will one day be with the Father and with the Son gazing at the splendor and beauty of their magnificence, but promises that one day the divine presence will engulf us. And this presence enables us both to experience and reflect the attributes of God. We experience and reflect divine love because the Spirit is in us; we experience and reflect divine joy because the Spirit is in us. We experience and reflect divine peace because the Spirit is in us. All the divine qualities we find in God are reflected in our lives precisely because the divine Spirit indwells us.

And anyone who has experienced even a taste of the Spirit of the living God in the soul knows that it's the greatest experience of life. And Paul says that the Spirit we have been given today is just a deposit! We experience in the Spirit a sliver of what will be experienced as one day not only will our eyes be filled with the glory of God but we ourselves filled with the glory of God as the Spirit is poured out in unimaginable proportions in our souls.

Just ponder that for a moment. God could have saved us so that we were mere spectators of the Trinitarian glory – their love, joy, peace, power, glory, perfection and so on. But God's grace went way beyond making us spectators of his glory – he made us partakers of his divine glory. He has placed a deposit of himself within us and will one day make full payment as we are overwhelmed not only in a glorious vision of God but engulfed, swallowed up with the very indwelling of God – God without and God within; beholding glory and possessed by glory. You see, the role of the Spirit is not only to apply God's salvation to us but to make us partakers of the divine nature (as Peter puts it in 2 Peter 1:4). That's why Jesus said, hey guys I have to go so I can send the Spirit. In a manner of speaking Jesus is saying, the best is yet to come and he can't come until I leave. Jonathan Edwards was right when he said, "The sum of all that Christ purchased for men was the Holy Spirit" (Essay on the Trinity).

Thus, the Father is the author of salvation, the Son is the agent of salvation, and the Spirit is both the applier and the essence of God's salvation.

B. Relationships of the Trinity

What's important to note in the various roles, the members of the Trinity is this unity, in its diversity, works in complete harmony. And the reason they work in harmony is because they humbly submit to one another. The Son lovingly submits to the will of the Father. The Son lovingly submits to the Spirit as the Spirit leads him. The Spirit submits to the will both of the Father (as the quarterback) and the Son who sends the Spirit. And it would seem from this passage that this submission within the Godhead is eternal as reflected in Ephesians 1:4 where we read that the Father "chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world." Even before there was time and creation there was an order within the Trinity. Even today the Son is at the *right*

hand of the Father suggesting that the order of authority is maintained beyond redemption. In other words, the Father's loving authority over the Son and the Son's loving submission to the Father, and the Spirit's submission to both is an eternal relationship. That is not to say that any member of the Trinity is inferior to another. Rather, each is fully and equally God.² Yet in the harmony of their relationship there is an order of loving authority and loving submission.³ That's why there is unity and diversity working in perfect, beautiful and glorious harmony!

I. The Implications of Roles and Relationships in the Trinity

So what does this mean for us? What are the implications that can be derived from this teaching on the Trinity?

A. It shows us the glory of loving authority and loving submission in harmony

For many, the word "submission" is an evil word that brings up images of slavery and domination – someone ordering another to do something and the other carries out begrudgingly. I don't have to tell you that in our culture the idea of wives submitting to husbands, and people submitting to authorities placed over them is not popular, much less politically correct.

But here in the relationships of the Trinity, that submission is within the character of God himself. The Father delights in using his authority to glorify the Son. And the Son and Spirit love to submit for the sake of the glory of the Father. Unfortunately, the sinfulness of man has turned something glorious into something repulsive. And since we are called to be people who reflect the glory of God, it makes sense that part of that glory is humble and loving submission. To submit as a wife is to show people a part of God. To lovingly submit to a boss or someone else in authority over you is to reflect the glory and harmony of the trinity. After all, for there to be glorious harmony in an orchestra, the violin player, trumpet player and percussionist must humbly submit himself to the conductor. For the football play to be beautiful, submission to the quarterback is required.

We, however, live in a world when everyone wants to play their own instrument, in their own way, in their own time. And beauty and harmony is utterly lost. For there to be harmony in marriage, in church, in a nation, there must be glad and willing submission and loving, benevolent leadership. I believe all of us need this lesson. Harmony and glory requires loving authority and loving submission.

B. It shows the importance of roles in our relationships.

Again, another unpopular concept is the idea that there are roles to play in our relationships – in our marriages, in our families and in our church. Contemporary culture sees roles in the confines of marriage as suffocating and limiting. They view it as conforming and obligatory. Everyone wants to break out of the mold and be free. And in so doing, harmony is once again lost.

² Theologians call this the ontological trinity (ontological meaning being). That is, in their nature each is equal in divinity, worth and dignity.

³ Theologians refer to this order of submission and authority in roles and relationships as the economic or functional Trinity.

It's my belief that when we discover God's designed roles for our lives, for our marriages as husband and wife, and families that it will not be suffocating, but freeing. Only then will we reflect the harmony intended and modeled by our Creator. Only then will we experience the glory, beauty and joy of unity, and diversity, working in harmony.

If there is disharmony within a marriage or a church, the probability is that it's because one or more doesn't know their role or function. Harmony requires embracing and living out the concepts of loving authority and loving submission in the designed roles God intended. These differences are not things to be resisted or mourned, but something to be celebrated and embraced.

Our God is a glorious God. Within his oneness there is a diversity of persons with different authority and roles. And this is reflected in everything we see around us – unity and diversity working in orderly harmony. Our God is the very foundation and pattern for our relationships and the very world he created. Praise Him!

Soli Deo Gloria