

The Trinity

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“You tell us that there are three gods and yet one,” the puzzled Irish said when St. Patrick was preaching the gospel to them in the 5th century AD. “How can that be?” The saint bent down and plucked a shamrock. “Do you not see,” he said, “how in this wildflower three leaves are united on one stalk, and will you not then believe that there are indeed three persons and yet one God?”¹

Using this illustration from nature, St. Patrick was able to help some of the pagan Celts to accept the doctrine of the Trinity.

I think an even better illustration of the Trinity is the universe itself (though no illustration is perfect).² Isn't it interesting that the entire physical universe (uni=one) consists of three and only three aspects—space, time, and matter? If you were to take away any of these three, you would no longer have a universe.

- Space consists of length, width, and height—three in one. If you were to take away any of these dimensions, you would no longer have space.
- Time consists of past, present, and future—three in one. If you were to take away any of these aspects, you would no longer have time.
- Matter consists of energy in motion producing phenomena—three in one. If there were no energy there could be no motion or phenomena. If there were no motion, there would be no energy or phenomena. If there were no phenomena, it would be because there was no energy or motion.

We see this tri-unity composing the very fabric of the universe. Why would the universe reflect a trinitarian nature? Could it be that God made His universe to reflect His own trinitarian nature? I believe that God left His fingerprints on the work of His creation, and we see in it a reflection of the Trinity.

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So what does the Bible teach about the Trinity? It clearly affirms the existence of three distinct Persons that are all identified as the one God of the universe. This is not a contradiction because we are not saying that God is both one person and three persons. Nor are we saying that God is both one god and three gods. We are saying that God is one in essence and three in Person. There is one “what,” and there are three “whos.” As you can see, God is one and three in different ways. Just as the one universe exists as space, time, and matter, the one God exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Case for the Trinity

Our belief in the Trinity does not first come from our observation of the universe, but from Scripture. The following premises are all taught in the Bible and form the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Premise 1: There is only one God.

Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is One LORD (Deuteronomy 6:4).

For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me (Isaiah 46:9).

Premise 2: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all identified in Scripture as God.

God the Father (Galatians 1:1).

the Word was God (John 1:1).

why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.... You have not lied to men but to God (Acts 5:3–4).

Premise 3: These three each relate to one another and to the world as distinct Persons.

In Mark 1:10–11, Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice from Heaven (the Father) says, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” We see here that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could not be the same Person; they are distinctly acting in different roles at the same time.

Toward the end of His ministry, Jesus said He would ask the Father to send to us “another Helper”—the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). Do you see the three distinct Persons involved in this request?

Conclusion: The one true God of the Bible has revealed Himself to exist in three distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is much, much more evidence to back up each of the above premises biblically. To look at more of the biblical data, please see *God Is Triune*.³

The Doctrine of the Trinity Is Essential

Some say that it is not important to believe the doctrine of the Trinity, but this attitude is mistaken. The doctrine of the Trinity underlies key teachings that are essential to the gospel. For example, those who deny the Trinity usually deny that Jesus is God. But if the Jesus you believe in is not God, you don’t have a Jesus who can save you (that is, you have a false savior, or another Jesus, as Paul put it in Galatians 1:6–9).

Also, if we deny that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, we deny God His inherent personal or relational characteristics. For instance, God would not be a loving God from all eternity if He had to wait until He created in order to love anyone (because love must be shared). But if God is more than one Person, there has been a loving relationship from all eternity among the Persons of God. Believing in a relational God is significant because it affects the way we relate to one another, as well as to God.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Are Persons Living in Relationship

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not impersonal entities. They each possess personhood and from eternity past have lived in personal relationship with each other. We call them Persons because they live in relationship with one another and because they all exhibit qualities of “personhood” (that is, will, emotion, intellect, moral character, etc.). Each member of the Trinity can refer to Himself as “I” and can communicate to another member of the Trinity as “You.” Though the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, they are distinct enough to love one another, to give to one another, to communicate to one another, to live for one another, and to indwell one another.

The Son’s relationship to His Father

How does the Son relate to the Father? From all eternity the Son has been the Father’s beloved and “only begotten Son” (John 3:16; 17:5). Jesus said that the Father had granted Him as Son “to have life in Himself,” just “as the Father has life in Himself.”⁴ The Son is eternally self-existent as God and is of the same nature as the Father, yet His existence is from the Father. Eternally, the Son has related to the Father as a Son, and the Father has related to the Son as a Father, though not in a physical sense.

Since the Son has eternally related to the Father as a Son, He is eternally submissive to the Father. That is why the Son allowed Himself to be sent by the Father into the world. And that is why Jesus said, “My Father is greater than I.”⁵ This statement by Jesus only refers to the authority structure within the Godhead; it does not refer to any difference between the nature of the Father and the nature of the Son. It is important to stress that Christ’s submission to His Father does not in any way diminish His nature as God the Son. He is equal to the Father in essence. He is to be worshiped and glorified on the same level as the Father. Jesus said that all should honor Him “just as they honor the Father.”⁶

The Holy Spirit’s relationship to the Father and Son

The word used to show the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the other members of the Trinity is proceeding. In John 15:26, Jesus said that He would send to us the Holy Spirit, “which proceeds from the Father.” Though the Spirit proceeds from the Father, He is equal to the Father and the Son and is to be equally honored. Keep in mind that this proceeding and sending is happening between three Persons living in loving relationship with each other.

Structure in the Trinity

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always existed in a structure of relationships. The Father is the Head, then the Son, then the Spirit. These three timeless and equal Persons have positions of authority based on their relationships with each other. This structure of authority is reflected in the family and in the church. Like the Trinity, all the members of the family and in the church have equal value, but not all have the same role. God commands husbands to lead their wives and fathers to lead their families. This does not make them more important than others in the home or the church. As in the Trinity, difference in roles does not negate equality of value and nature.

Protecting the Oneness of God

We must make sure we protect the concept of the oneness of God by being careful with the terms that we use to describe the Trinity. Since God is three Persons, but only one Being, it would be inappropriate to speak of members of the Trinity as beings or individuals. We should also use the word *distinct* rather than *separate* when speaking of the Persons in the Trinity (they are mutually indwelling and cannot be separated). It would be erroneous to imply that there are three separate individuals in the Trinity. The Trinity consists of one being revealed in three distinct persons.

We Reflect God's Personhood and Relations

As Christians, we derive our concept of person from the relations in the Trinity. From our understanding of the Trinity (a social being), we recognize that a person is a relational being, not just someone with a mind, a will, and emotions. God, as a relational Being, is the source of our personhood. God made us (in His image) as persons who have the capacity to relate to one another and to God. We have a mind, a will, and emotions so that we can have that capacity.

Individually we are incomplete

After God created Adam, He said, "It is not good that man should be alone." Then He made Eve.⁷ Adam was incomplete without Eve because, without her, he didn't have some other human to relate to. While Genesis 9:6 indicates that each individual human being bears the image of God, Genesis 1:27 also indicates that man and woman together also reflect God's image: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them."⁸ We too are not functioning as whole persons unless we are in relationship with others, as God is. We don't necessarily need to get married like Adam did (in heaven we won't be married), but we do need to have fellowship with others. God made us to relate to others, as He relates to Himself in His three persons.

Relating to reflect the image of God

Scripture expresses a wonderful comparison between the nature of God and the nature of the Church. Within both God and the Church, there is diversity, yet in unity. According to 1 Corinthians 12, the body of Christ is a unity composed of many parts functioning together for a purpose. Can you see how the body of Christ reflects the image of God? The Apostle Paul expected all the various members of the Church to bond together in love so that all believers would grow to be more like Christ. Paul prayed that we would:

grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15–16).

All of us are to use our gifts and abilities to help others grow spiritually. In doing so, we will be reflecting God's relational nature. There is "no holiness apart from social holiness" (as John Wesley said). Spiritual growth occurs in community (in fellowship and intimacy with other believers). This mirrors the social nature of God.

If the members of the Trinity have for eternity lived in self-giving love for each other, shouldn't we live in loving relationships with others? We were made in the image of God as social, relational beings. Should we not then focus on others rather than ourselves? Should we not emphasize community instead of "radical" individualism?

Trinitarian Worship

What does it mean to worship as a Trinitarian? A unitarian would pray only to the Father, neglecting the Son and the Spirit in worship. Trinitarian worship recognizes that we come to the Father with the aid of the Spirit and on the basis of the atoning work of the Son. As Trinitarians, we are to pray to the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son.

An important goal of worship is for us to become caught up into the dynamic life of God, into the love relationship that the members of the Trinity have for each other. Think particularly of the love that exists between the Father and the Son.⁹ Also think of what Christ did on the cross so that we could experience that love. The Father and Son live in wonderful communion with each other, and as a result of the Son's atoning work, the Spirit is able to help us participate in that fervent love relationship.

As Trinitarians, we not only pray to the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son, but we also pray to the Father, to the Son, and to the Spirit. Each of the members of the Trinity are to be prayed to, to be adored, to be verbally glorified, for they are all God and must be equally honored. Trinitarian worship brings glory to each member of the Trinity equally, recognizing the role each plays in our salvation.

Almighty and everlasting God,
You have given us, your servants, grace
by the confession of a true faith
to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity,
and in the power of the divine Majesty
to worship the unity.
Keep us steadfast in this faith,
that we may evermore be defended from all adversaries:
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.¹⁰

Conclusion

We have seen that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all the one infinite transcendent God. The three members of the Trinity have eternally lived in self-giving love for each other. The relations in the Trinity help us to understand how we as persons are to relate to God and to one another. We must bring glory to our Triune God, worshiping the Trinity in unity.

Footnotes

1. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*.
2. Morris, H., 1966. *Studies in the Bible and science*, pp.172–179. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed.
3. Hodge, B., 2008. God is triune. Retrieved from, <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2008/02/20/god-is-triune>
4. John 5:26.
5. John 14:28.
6. John 5:23.
7. Genesis 2:18.
8. Genesis 1:27.
9. Mark 2:10–11 and John 17 are two passages that give us a little insight into this.
10. *The book of common prayer*.