

The Persons of the Triune God – *Matt 3:16-17 and select passages*

Life in the Trinity #1

Introduction – For many people, the doctrine of the Trinity is a hopeless puzzle. Three is not one and one is not three, no matter how you figure it. This teaching often leads to a sense of intellectual embarrassment as we witness to those around us. Some charge that we teach there are three gods, or that there is only one God, but He has shown Himself to us in different ways, and in fact, these have been heretical teachings in the church.

Maybe this is the reason it is not expressed, taught, or discussed much in our day, even among Christians. But I believe this lack of emphasis on being Trinitarian Christians is hurting the witness of the church, the discipleship of the church, and the fellowship and kingdom that should be flowing out from the church.

“The doctrine of the Trinity is the most immense of all the doctrines of religion.” – (Shedd, c. 1878, commenting on Augustine’s work on the Trinity). This short series hopes to unpack some of the major aspects of that doctrine and some of its major implications in the life of the church today.

A Triune Ceremony (Matt 3:16-17) – The doctrine of the Trinity is summarized in the shorter catechism, *“There is but one only, the living and true God”* (A.5), and *“There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory”* (A.6). This is what the scriptures teach, but not by finding these exact words (nor the words to our Creeds) in the scriptures. Instead, the way the Lord teaches us is through a wonderful cascade of stories, songs, discourses, prophecies and benedictions that pile upon one another with the weight of truth. In Matthew we have an account of all three Persons of the Godhead at the time of Jesus’ baptism, together but distinct from one another. When the dove descends, we are reminded of the dove hovering over the waters at the time of the flood in Noah’s day – a day of a re-creating of the earth. This baptism is a re-creating time as well, for the new Adam is being filled with the Spirit in order to take dominion over the weed-infested garden. And if that is the case, then we should remember the Spirit hovering over the earth in Gen 1:1-2. The Triune God was there as well, which is why He speaks in Gen 1:26, *“Let Us make man in our own image...”*

Layers of Truth – In the Old Covenant there was a three-fold benediction (Num 6:24-26). In the New Covenant there is a three-fold benediction as well (2 Cor 13:14). Paul instructs us of the work of each Person in our salvation (Eph 1:3-14, esp v3, 14). When Jesus departs, the instructions He gives is that we are to baptize in the name (note, singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:18-19).

Each Person is God – The Father is God (John 20:17). The Son is God (John 1:1, 14, 20:28). The Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4).

Each Person is Distinct – The Father is distinct from the Son (John 15:9). The Father is distinct from the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The Son is distinct from the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35, John 15:26).

The Lord is One (Deut 6:4) – Yes, and so we are not polytheists, or Tri-theists. But the one-ness is not a monadic one; rather, it is a unity which is differentiated in Himself.

Modalism – Affirm that there is one God, and that there are three Persons equal in their divinity, but deny that they are three distinct Persons, and you have what has been called Modalism. This heresy was first associated with Sabellius (third century, AD), who affirmed that Jesus was God but that He was a certain manifestation, or mode, of appearing.

Subordinationism – Affirm three distinct Persons, but subordinated in divinity, and you have what is also called Arianism (Arius lived in the fourth century).

Trinitarianism – The Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Council of Chalcedon, and the Athanasian Creed, all attest to the biblical teaching of the Trinity. There is but one God who exists, simultaneously and eternally, as a mutual indwelling of three eternally distinct Persons. One author said, *“The Lord who is one is in some way a community, a fellowship.”* And that fellowship is a cooperation by which we come to our salvation.

One Important Application on This: The Trinity’s Role in Our Salvation –

Our Destination: The Father – We approach the Father in prayer (Matt 6:8-9). He is the One who chose us before the foundations of the world (Eph 1:3-4) and sent His only begotten Son for us.

Our Way to the Father: The Son – Jesus is the way to the Father (John 14:6). Jesus is our High Priest and Mediator before the Father (Heb 9:11-14). Jesus redeemed us by His blood, according to the Father’s election, that we might be saved (Eph 1:7-12).

Our Access to the Father: The Holy Spirit – We are quickened to life by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11), and by Him we are compelled to cry out, *“Abba, Father”* (Gal 4:6). It is by that indwelling Spirit that we have been sealed; He is our earnest of our inheritance (Eph 1:13-14).

Therefore, being saved is not simply about coming to Jesus. It is about coming to the Father in the name of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. To be brought into union with God is to be introduced into life in the Trinity where the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:13-14), the Son glorifies the Father and the Father glorifies the Son (John 17:1). And so three times, Paul would write that this work of salvation was *“to the praise of His glory”* (Eph 1:6, 12, 14).