
Title: What is the Trinity?

Series: Speaking of God

Teacher: Pastor Chad Bresson

Date: September 24, 2006

Introduction Our subject matter today has had no shortage of controversy throughout church history. And it continues to be controversial today. Trying to figure it out can feel daunting. But getting it wrong may have serious, serious consequences. Despite its seriousness, we live in a day when many evangelicals have decided that this is not a doctrine that is all that important. Instead of agreeing with Christ's church throughout history that to get this wrong is to be guilty of heresy, many today believe it is merely a minor error, if an error at all. It is no different, some think, than being wrong about the end times, or what kind of music we should sing in worship. What we're discussing today is the Trinity. And the Trinity today is considered "no big deal" by many. To be wrong about the Trinity is not to be a heretic. To be wrong about the Trinity is a minor point of consequence.

We don't believe that here. To get the Trinity wrong is to be wrong about who God is, what Christ has done for us, and ultimately, to be wrong about what we say we believe about salvation. It is important to remember the doctrine of the Trinity in connection with the study of God's attributes. When we think of God as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and so forth, we may have a tendency to think only of God the Father in connection with these attributes. But the biblical teaching on the Trinity tells us that all of God's attributes are true of all three persons of the Godhead for all are fully God. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith.

We also don't believe that this is mere intellectual exercise. There is a danger in thinking that this doctrine of the Trinity and explaining it is nothing more than mental gymnastics, as if it has no practical relevance to our every day lives. This is not an abstract math problem. It seems like a matter left for the eggheads at seminary or on church councils because theologians, pastors, and teachers have not done well in connecting the importance of the Trinity to what we say we believe about things like creation and salvation. We believe in the Trinity because Jesus is the Incarnate Emmanuel, who physically died, rose again, and ascended to His Father where He now **physically** reigns over all. AND as Christ ascended, He and the Father sent the Holy Spirit who now dwells in and among us. The Trinitarian structure of redemption has everything to do with **who** God is in His very nature.

The Trinity and affirming the Trinity is foundational to our Christianity. It is what makes us who we are. Islam rejects it, saying it's impossible. Judaism rejects it because they believe it to be **polytheistic**. Polytheism is the belief that there are many gods. Hinduism and other pagan religions are polytheistic.

While it is foundational, few basics in the scriptures are under duress in our evangelicalism than this fundamental teaching of scripture. Some are more blatant in their denial than others. The United Pentecostal Church... which boasts of T. D. Jakes, Tommy Ten-

ney, Philips, Craig & Dean, & Jim Bakker, is not subtle in its rejection of the historical understanding of the Trinity. Christ, the Son of God, represents God as a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit... but there's only one person, many manifestations. Other denials of the Trinity are more subtle, yet just as dangerous. The longest running and deepest division in historical Christianity between Eastern Orthodoxy and what we now know as the Catholic Church occurred because the East and the West could not agree and still do not agree on how we are to think of the Trinity (and for the record, the Catholic Church in the ninth century, got it right). The sad reality is that non-Trinitarian thinking and/or disregard for the Trinity has crept into conservative evangelical circles in recent years.

The hang up for most who are in error is a failure to adequately answer the following question: "How can God be three persons, yet one God?" Through much of the early church, the big question was whether or not Jesus was divine and if he was divine, how was that divinity expressed? The error of **Gnosticism** was bound up in the debate over whether Jesus as God could have had a body. Gnosticism taught that salvation is achieved through special knowledge. It also believe that the material world, or matter, is inherently evil. Thus, it denied the incarnation of Christ because to have a body would be to attribute sin and evil to God. It denied that Jesus could have died because death is evil. Benny Hinn and some others have recapitulated this historic error today when they say "Christ appears to have died", or "Christ was asleep".

And of course, the question of Jesus divinity has always been a stumbling block for the Jews. The Jews could never get over the fact that the Old Testament says there is one God. Judaism is distinctly monotheistic and Jesus' divinity is understood to be an attack on that **monotheism**. Monotheism is the belief that there is only one true God.

In our day, there is an error I've already mentioned that also does not want to reconcile Christ's divinity with the Old Testament statement that God is one. It also views our understanding of the Trinity as an attack on monotheism. The United Pentecostal Church, the denomination that T.D. Jakes belongs to, believes in **modalism**. This is why the United Pentecostal Church is commonly referred to as "Oneness Pentecostals" or "Jesus Only" Pentecostals. Modalism is a serious error, but one many evangelicals have unfortunately been willing to wink at. Modalism denies the Trinity, by suggesting that God is a single person who, throughout biblical history, has revealed Himself in three modes, or forms. In the Old Testament, God manifested himself in the mode of the Father. In the New Testament, God was born in a manger in the mode of the Son. When Jesus ascended into the clouds, God came back to earth in the mode of the Holy Spirit. These modes are considered to be consecutive and never simultaneous. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the modalist, never all exist at the same time. What makes modalism attractive is that it believes in the divinity of Christ. This teaching gives new meaning to the Philips, Craig, and Dean praise and worship song, "You are God Alone". The problem with modalism is that it makes nonsense of the gospels where we find Jesus talking to his Father. Modalism reduces Jesus to being nothing more than a schizophrenic. Christ's prayer in the garden is nothing more than self-talk. Christ's cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) is nothing more than a delusionary swoon. Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit on behalf of the Son and the Father while they stay in heaven (John 14:16-17, 26, 15:26, 16:13-15; Acts 2:32-33) is a shallow ploy for comfort.

This error is nothing new. Historically, it has been called Sabellianism, after a man named Sabellius, who lived in the 200's. The difference between Sabellianism and modalism seems to be in the emphasis on the Father and the Son. Sabellianism, from what we know of it, believed that God the Father appeared in different modes. Modalism emphasizes Jesus so that the entire Godhead, is wrapped up in God the Son. Many evangelicals refuse to consider Modalism's denial of the Trinity a heresy. The main reason for this is because Modalism affirms Christ's deity, which is considered the central core of basic Christian doctrine. Many Modalists sound right, talk right, seemingly act right. They even seemingly write good praise and worship music. How could they be heretics? They must not be heretics. Who are we to say they preach another gospel? The reality is that modalism is heresy. It is another gospel. Evangelicals downplay this heresy to their doctrinal peril.

Believe it or not, there are polytheists who claim to be evangelicals. Benny Hinn is a Tri-Theist. He does not believe that God is One. God the Father is a god. Jesus is a god. And the Holy Spirit is a god. Jimmy Swaggart is also a Tri-Theist. Hinn's teaching on this is quite bizarre. He was once asked "how many persons of the godhead are there?" and his answer was "Nine." Three gods, each a triune person. Hinn does not believe that God is one god, but merely one in purpose. He does not believe that what is true for the Father is also true for the Son or for the Holy Spirit. One of the spin-off implications for this kind of teaching is another error that is known as the "little gods" teaching. Hinn claims that we are "little gods" and "god-men", a doctrine that has also been taught by such names as Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, and Robert Tilton. In Hinn's Tri-theism, Jesus became a god, he was not born as God. It is in this teaching that Hinn and Crouch and others begin to have a lot in common with Mormonism. In fact, current mormon theologians cite Hinn and Crouch and other tri-theists in defense of their own heresies.

What is at stake in every single error, including modalism, is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ did not have a body, he could not have been the second Adam. If Christ did not physically die, he could not have borne our sin. If Christ is not distinct as a person from the Father, he could not have risen from the dead.

So, what do we say we believe about the Trinity?

God in Three Persons

Three different names are used when referring to God: God or Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Yet these three names are designations for the persons of the godhead which has *one* name: Yahweh or Jehovah. These are not three names for three different existences; otherwise what we have is tri-theism or 3 gods. These three names are ways of designating the three persons. I don't know how much we've thought about this, but the language of Matthew 28:18-20 cannot be overlooked: "¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, **All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** ¹⁹ **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰ **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**" Did you catch how Christ phrased it? Baptize them in the NAME of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He

didn't say "names". He said "name". One name. Three persons. One God. Three persons.

God is three very distinct persons.

Even though God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have eternally existed as three distinct persons, there is only one God.

This is called the doctrine of the Trinity.

One other thing we should say at this point... the three persons of the Godhead do not or could not exist independently from one another. This has been a point of debate through the centuries. If it were true that the equality of the persons of the Godhead means that they could exist independently from one another, what we would have would be three gods.

The Trinity in the Bible

The word "trinity" is never found in the Bible.

The word "trinity" means "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness".

The doctrine of the Trinity is progressively revealed in Scripture.

The Trinity is alluded to in the creation narrative (Genesis 1:26; Genesis 3:22).

There are passages in which one person is called "God" or "the Lord" and another is called "God" (Psalm 45:6-7; Hebrews 1:8).

All three members of the Trinity were present at Christ's baptism (Matthew 3:16-17).

Jesus affirmed that all three members of the Trinity are distinct in their personhood (Matthew 28:18-19).

The Meaning of the Trinity

Because God is three distinct persons, the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son (2 Cor. 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2).

Each of the persons of the Trinity is fully God (Genesis 1:1; Colossians 2:9; Acts 5:3-4).

The Bible is clear that there is only one God and not three (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5; Romans 3:30; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Ultimately, the Trinity is one of those "secret things" that "belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29).

If Jesus is not both fully God and a separate person from God, then he could not have borne the complete wrath of God, died, and risen from the dead.

The Distinct Roles of the Trinity

In both creation and redemption the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all had distinct roles (Genesis 1:1,2, 2:7; John 1:1-3; John 3:16-17, 6:38, 14:16, 16:7).

These different functions and roles are the outworking of the eternal relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The unity and diversity within the Trinity provide a wonderful basis for the unity and diversity we experience in everyday life (1 Cor. 11:3; Ephesians 5:31).