

Trinity

Every year I take great joy in talking through some aspect of the Trinity — a subject I would not otherwise cover as there is no passage in the Bible that specifically sets out the theology of God as Trinity. I thought I would distil a little trinitarian theology into ten minutes or so, starting with how the theology came about, and concluding with why it matters.

It began with Jesus. The gospels are full of the question of who Jesus was, and what he was. The disciples knew he was special from the beginning, but it took them some time to see first that he was the messiah, and then that he was more than that. That sense of who exactly Jesus was was not completely solved by the crucifixion, resurrection or ascension — though they helped. So early Christians knew that Jesus had been born by the power of the Spirit to a virgin, they knew that he had acted with the power of God, and spoken with God's wisdom and love. Through John's gospel we hear the many times that Jesus equates himself with 'the Father' — revealing himself to be a special envoy, a vicegerent, but more still: he said 'I and the Father are one'. And he spoke of being 'in the Father', and 'the Father in him' — a level of interconnectedness that goes beyond our language to speak of. Early Christians found that when they said 'Jesus is Lord', in the sense that he was their master, they wanted to say more — that he was LORD, Yahweh, that he had the same nature as the Lord God Almighty. Recognising that Jesus was truly and completely divine, they saw that this implied that God was completely Christlike. They understood that Christ could bear salvation for all of us, *because* he was God. They understood that Christ could model and teach how to live life well *because* he was the author of life itself — and yet he was God as a distinct person to the Father.

Once this had been wrestled with and established the same process was then undergone for the Holy Spirit. They reflected on how the Spirit had at times empowered and enabled prophets of the Old Testament, but now enabled and empowered all Christians. They thought about how the Spirit had descended on Jesus at his baptism, they thought about the cloud of glory that appeared on Mount Sinai when Moses received the commandments, and the cloud when Jesus was transfigured, and they thought about the way that Jesus spoke of the coming of the Spirit, calling the Spirit the Advocate, or helper, or along-sider, or comforter. They decided that the Spirit was not merely an expression of God, or the power of God, or of Christ, but a *person* of God, co-equal, but distinct.

Recognising that Christ was the only-begotten son of the Father, they needed to recognise that the Spirit was not begotten, but *proceeded* from the Father — and yet all three were present in the beginning of all things. Later, centuries after the council of Nicaea had decided how we speak of the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, European Christians began to add to the creed that the Spirit proceeded from the Father *and the Son*. They believed that since the Spirit had come to us following Jesus's agency, following his resurrection and ascension it was legitimate to say the Spirit proceeded from both Father and Son. This tiny addition to the creed was a significant part of the why the church split between eastern Orthodox and western Catholic.

Whether or not Spirit and Son proceeded or were begotten from the Father, equality in the Godhead seemed important. Early in the fourth century the heretic Arius tried to argue for the primacy of the Father — he argued that if we speak of Christ as the son then there was a time in which only the Father existed, and not the Son or the Spirit. This was a substantial part of the discussion at the Council of Nicaea (from which we get the creed), at which his thoughts were ultimately rejected. Why? Athanasius, Arius's chief opponent, made a three stage argument:

1. No creature could redeem another creature.
2. According to Arius, Jesus Christ was another creature.

3. Therefore, according to Arius, Jesus Christ could not redeem humanity.

Again, this might sound abstruse, but this is important theology that genuinely matters to how we know and understand God. This same argument is why the church does not recognise Jehovah's Witnesses as properly Christian — they are Arian, and do not accept the Trinity.

What does the equality and unity of the Trinity imply? For me it suggests the profoundest consequence of God being love. Love is not a thing that can exist on its own — it must have at least two persons, each loving the other. Within the peculiarities and paradoxes of God being three persons, yet a single God, there is a kind of sense — because three persons is community, and three persons can therefore, between them, personify love. The Father never has an argument with the Son — the Spirit never competes with either. They are perfect in empathy, and this is very important to us, because the creator who made a world that could fall into brokenness completely understands the agony of that brokenness through the suffering of Christ. It is important that we cannot divide the Trinity, or we end up with desperately ugly salvation theories, instead of the beauty of a loving God dwelling among us, feeling our pain, revealing himself and opening up the way of salvation.

Perhaps the most exciting prospect is that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and so, as a consequence, we are drawn into the Trinity. God wants us to know him and know his love with the closeness and depth that each person of the Trinity knows. What you know and experience now is barely the beginning.

Finally: why does it have to be so complicated?

When we fall in love with someone the process involves getting to know each other — opening to the other the quiet, hidden, fragile parts of who we are as well as our hopes and dreams, fears and foibles. We metaphorically, but also literally, get naked in front of each other, trusting that in that love we won't be scorned or ridiculed. God, already knowing us, nonetheless wants us to be open with him, but also to know him, just as we wish to be known, loved and understood by those who love us. God revealing himself as Trinity is a part of this loving openness, just as God's showing himself through the person of Christ was another. God wants to be known, truthfully.

What do we do with this knowledge? For me, the response is wonder. The confusions and paradoxes of God as Trinity don't go away, but they make sense, in much the same way that relativity is difficult, but also the most elegant answer to the problems of space, time and gravity. *This* answer, such as we have, *does* explain more of God. And knowing God leads to love and worship, increasing our capacity to respond to God's love, with love.

Amen.

SDG.