

“Serious Trivia”

Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17; Romans 8:12-17

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

St. Augustine, one of the most influential thinkers in church history, once remarked that “anyone who denies the Trinity is in danger of losing her salvation, but anyone who tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing her mind.” Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost when many churches celebrate the God who is Three in One and One in Three. But Augustine leaves us in an awkward position. We cannot simply deny the Trinitarian God because we think it is unnecessary or complicated, as many well-meaning people have tried to do, because the Trinity is too tightly wrapped up with how God has revealed himself to us, and if we reject the Trinity then we reject God's revelation. But neither can we hope to truly understand the Trinity, because the being of God is so far greater than what our delicate minds can conceive. One plus One plus One does not equal One in any other context of our lives, and indeed it is a logical impossibility (so far as we can understand) that One being could exist eternally in Three Persons. So we cannot ignore the Trinity, but neither can we explain it in a twenty-minute sermon that boils down to individual tidbits to apply to our daily lives.

We have to be honest: you will not find the word “Trinity” anywhere in Scripture. Neither Jesus nor the Apostles explained definitively that God exists in Trinity, and the writers of the Old Testament would have been baffled and probably offended if you had asked them about it. It took the early church more than three hundred years to officially define the doctrine of the Trinity, and so the language we use to describe the Trinity is highly technical and precise. Many Christians through the years have therefore either ignored the Trinity for being confusing or rejected it as being unscriptural.

Even the definition we have is difficult to grasp, even if you can accurately quote it. What does it really mean? In the Middle Ages, when not many people were literate and much of your faith was learned through the visuals of church rituals and stained glass and illuminated manuscripts, a lot of artists tried to depict the meaning of the Trinity in various ways. Sometimes they wanted to show the three-in-one nature of God, and so they tried images of God with one body and one head that had three faces, or three interlocking rings, or what's known as the “shield of the Trinity,” which was intended to diagram the relationships of the Trinity rather than depict what God looks like. Other artists wanted to show more of how the persons of the Trinity relate to us in Scripture and in history, and so they showed more of what the Trinity has done for us. Often the Father is shown as a kingly, distinguished man, the Son is shown as Jesus on the cross, and the Spirit is shown as a dove.

So it's even difficult on that level: is the Trinity important because of what it tells us about God's nature, or because of what it tells us about how God relates to us? And the specific definitions used get quite technical. It took the church several councils and many years to sift out some of the shades of meaning in the definition of the Trinity, and even then, they could really only do it by inventing new words. So on the one hand, it seems like this is so much trivia, such intricate detail that doesn't really matter when it comes down to brass tacks. But at the same time, sometimes trivia is really quite important in a relationship: the date of your anniversary might be trivia to some, but you'd better not forget it. And likewise, this detailed, technical, theological definition that is the Trinity is important enough that it makes the difference between orthodoxy and heresy. It's that serious. It's certainly true that you can follow Jesus without being able to accurately define the Trinity,

but if you deliberately and knowingly stray outside the bounds of orthodoxy, it's going to hurt your relationship with God because you are refusing to know Him as He has revealed Himself.

But it comes down to two truths that are equally true and, though our human logic fails to see how they can both be true at the same time, they are not contradictory. The first truth is this: that there is one God and only one God, and there has only ever been one God. Deuteronomy 6:4 proclaims the defining characteristic of Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And yet in those days after the Holy Spirit descended on the church at Pentecost, the early Christian leaders struggled to understand the nature of Jesus who had been resurrected and the Holy Spirit who had come to indwell his church. The second truth that they came to was that it was not enough to call either Jesus or the Spirit merely a servant or a creation or anything less than God; both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are fully deserving of being called *God*, yet they are distinct persons. And so the early Christians took the various threads of Scripture and saw that when woven together they made a much greater whole. The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, but the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. One God exists eternally as three persons, God the Father, God the Son who is eternally begotten of the Father, and God the Spirit who proceeds from the Father through the Son.

This is the great and beautiful mystery of the Trinity. It is a gift of God. We would not know this about him unless he revealed it to us. But Bishop N.T. Wright once wrote in reference to the Trinity, "If we are truly speaking of the true God, then the truest form of that speech can never be abstract discussion *about* God. It must be speech addressed to God. It must be worship. It must be prayer." One of the oldest mistakes we have made when speaking of the Trinity is that we treat this most precious revelation as a cold, stuffy doctrine separate from the living, loving person of God. We make charts and diagrams and analogies to help us understand the Trinity, as though God were a machine and we were examining his gears and bolts. But this is not how we treat the people we love. I would wager that even those of you who have been married for sixty years, though your spouse is so familiar to you, you are still sometimes surprised by them. You still discover those bits of trivia about them that are far from insignificant, they help you know your loved one better. We don't make diagrams to explain our loved ones. We love them though they are mysteries to us, *because* they are mysteries to us, and we explore those mysteries by living with them and loving them in relationship.

And so while it is true that some mysteries can only be partly seen by squinting eyes and partly grasped by numb fingers, this mystery helps us see the beauty of our beloved Lord. We preach the truth of the Trinity not because we need to pass a test, but because we want to know our God better and serve Him better. He has entrusted us with the deep things of His nature and His character, and we love Him better for it.

This Trinitarian God helps us properly worship the persons of the Trinity as they deserve. We worship the Holy Spirit as the Lord, the Giver of Life, who is worshipped and glorified along with the Father and the Son. He is not an impersonal force or indistinguishable from the Father or the Son, He is God, with a will and a personality and desires. He is the Spirit of Christ in us who forms us into the image He made us for. The Son of God, likewise, is God who was willing to become incarnate in human flesh as Jesus, fully God and fully human, who is Lord over all things. He is uncreated, eternal, of the same nature as the Father though He was willing to set aside that nature for us. God the Father is too often thought of as the vengeful, angry "God of the Old Testament," and we overlook the love

and forgiveness that He showered on an undeserving world. Or we think of Him as being distant, remote, and uncaring, when in reality He are the intimately-involved Creator who is the Source of all things. Especially today, Father's Day, we recognize that some people have good fathers and some don't, and so calling God our Father is sometimes a difficult thing, but He is our good Father, good in the way that fathers were intended to be good, good in all the ways that some fathers are not. And so we do not elevate one Person of the Trinity over another.

The Trinity of God displays God's greatness. Even apart from all the mighty things God has done, He is worthy of all our honor because of who He is. Yes, He showed us His lovingkindness and faithfulness when we were faithless and spiteful, but more than that, His very being shatters our boundaries, and we must create new words and new concepts if we are to begin to speak of His greatness. The Trinity refuses to let us get too comfortable with God. It jerks us back from familiarity with our Creator and reminds us that He is, in a sense, alien to us. Or, to use a better word, He is transcendent in ways that boggle our understanding, while at the same time this one who is wrapped in incomprehensible light reaches out to us in love. We worship God because He is so far beyond us.

And we worship God because of the beauty we see in the Trinity. We see in the Trinity an eternal, self-giving love. Though God is Three Persons who are distinguishable, He shares One Essence as He has done for all eternity. Though God is Three Persons, God shares one will; in Him there is no disagreement, there is only complete harmony. Though we know God as Father and Son and Spirit, we know that there is no hierarchy within God. The image we sometimes use is that of a divine dance, an intimate community, a loving fellowship. And it is in God that we see eternal, self-giving love, as the persons of the Trinity truly love one another as themselves.

And so God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit as an overflow of that self-giving love. We would not know God if He had not shown Himself to us. We would not have hope if He had not given it to us. We would not know love or community if He had not first loved us. In fact, we realize that the entirety of creation is an overflow of God's loving community. We tend to think of God the Father as primarily the creator, but as we read in Genesis, the Spirit of God was brooding over the waters of creation, and we learn from John's retelling of the creation story that it is through the Son that all things were made, and nothing was made without Him. God let us know Himself as He is purely out of His surpassing faithfulness.

It is also in the Trinity that we see God at work. Again, we often tend to think of the Father as being intimately involved in creation, as well as speaking His word to His people. The Son of God chose to unite Himself with humanity and be born as one of us, He chose to be tempted and suffer as one of us, He chose to give His life for us, and when He was resurrected from the dead He became Lord over all things, and now He is certainly our advocate. He breathed out His Spirit to indwell us, to fill the church, and to give us the life that we rejected in our pride.

Yet even more profound than this, God has invited us to join in His self-giving, loving community. When Jesus became incarnate, He forever took up humanity into the Godhead. Part of proclaiming the Trinity is affirming that Jesus united the divine and the human natures in Himself so that we might have a place in God's fellowship. His nature is fully divine, and yet it is also fully human, and in Him there is no contradiction or confusion. In His humanity He taught us how we can be born again, born of His Spirit, so that we can enter His kingdom and the world might be saved. The Apostle

Paul wrote of how we can become co-heirs with Christ in His sufferings and glory, and we are made His brothers and sisters. His Spirit prompts us to call His Father our Father. As a part of God's deep mystery, He has included us rebellious, stiff-necked people into His own intimate community.

And in this Trinity, God is revealed as a sending, including God. The Father speaks to His people, and the Son enters our world from the loving communion of the Trinity, and the Spirit is sent upon the church. And as we are included in God's community, so we are sent out in like character to include those who are not yet a part of that community. "Therefore go," Jesus said, "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them" — that is, initiating them into the holy community — "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As we are lovingly included in the holy name of the Trinity, so we lovingly reach out in the holy name of the Trinity.

And so today we conclude by affirming one of the ancient declarations of our faith, the Nicene Creed, which proclaims the beauty and the truth of our Triune God. It is not simply a matter of theological trivia, it is an affirmation of our mission as the people of God:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
Very God of very God,
Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father,
By whom all things were made;
Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,
And was made man,
And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.
He suffered and was buried,
And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
And ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of the Father.
And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead:
Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The Lord and giver of life,
Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified,
Who spoke by the Prophets.

And I believe in one universal and apostolic church;
I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins;

And I look for the Resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the world to come.
Amen.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)