

Trinity Introduction

Knaphill friends have heard me tell the story before about how I was once visited by a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses and when they knew I was a Christian, they pointed out that the word 'Trinity' is not in the Bible.

"Neither is the word 'trousers'," I replied, "but I'm not about to take mine off!"

My point was that we needed to invent a word like 'Trinity' to describe what underlies the biblical teaching.

Because the Christians of the first few centuries were faced with a dilemma. Their faith clearly originated in Judaism, which emphasises that there is but one God. However, Jesus appeared on the scene doing things only God was allowed to do. For example, do you remember how the religious leaders criticised him when he pronounced the paralysed man lowered through the roof as forgiven? They said only God could do that. They were faced with two alternatives: either condemn Jesus as a blasphemer, or rethink.

And this was further complicated after Pentecost, when the Spirit came, also doing divine work. So how do you account for a God who is one but who is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit?

Muslims and others will tell us this is just plain nonsense: three persons cannot be One. However, the tribes Muhammad encountered and condemned for this reason were probably ones who were actually 'tritheists' – people who believed in the three gods. And there is a genuine difficulty with the word 'persons' that we use in connection with the Trinity. It's the nearest English word we have, but it's not exactly the same.

And so eventually, after three centuries or so of wrestling with these questions, the Church promulgated the doctrine of the Trinity. And we should think of that doctrine not so much as a tight definition but rather a set of boundaries: while you stay within the boundaries, you are describing the true God; go outside the boundaries, and you are not.¹

Essentially, those boundaries are three lines of a triangle and we need to hold all three lines. Erase one of the lines, and we fall into heresy.

The three boundaries are that there is one God, eternally in three Persons, who are equal. What happens if you remove one of the three lines?

If you keep one God and three Persons but remove the equality, you get the ancient heresy promoted by a man called Arius, called 'subordinationism', where Jesus and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father – they are less than him. This is what Jehovah's Witnesses believe.

If you keep one God and the equality but rub out the idea that God is eternally three Persons, then you get another ancient heresy, this time called 'modalism', which was advocated by a man called Sabellius. He said that God was the Father in the Old Testament, Jesus in the Gospels, and the Spirit from Acts onwards. God changed his mode. You can see it in poor sermon illustrations that compare the Trinity to H₂O, saying that it can be ice, water, or steam. But Jesus addresses the Father in prayer and promises the Spirit, so this cannot be right.

Finally, if you keep the three persons and the equality and but remove the 'one God' line, then you end up with what I said I think Muhammad encountered, not trinitarianism but tritheism, a belief in three gods, contrary to our Jewish heritage.

Now you may say this is thoroughly brain-bending, and perhaps it is! But why should we expect our understanding of the Almighty to be simple? When Albert Einstein's theories became popular a century ago and they replaced much of Isaac Newton's thinking, some commented that God would not have had to have stretched himself that much to come up with Newton's equations. There was something appropriate, if you believed in God, that Einstein's work was so complex.

Perhaps that is a principle worth bearing in mind when we find the doctrine of the Trinity difficult.

I could say more, and in the past I once preached a series of five sermons to explore the Trinity. If you want any reading on the subject, I particularly recommend 'Experiencing the Trinity' by Darrell Johnson.

[Romans 5:1-5](#)

I said the Trinity underpinned the biblical witnesses to the one God, eternally and equally subsisting in three Persons. Here I'm going to look at their various rôles once – as Paul says in the context – we have been justified by faith.

Firstly, God the Father brings peace.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 1)

Living under the Roman Empire, Augustus Caesar had established peace, the so-called *Pax Romana*, and he claimed to have done so by the principle of *Iustitia*, or justice. His successors had taken titles such as 'Lord' and 'Saviour'.² Does any of this sound familiar?!

Paul takes this language and utterly transforms it. God the Father, not Caesar, has brought justification, treating people as if they had never sinned, through a Lord and Saviour not called Caesar but Jesus Christ.

And from that he had given the gift of peace, not peace brought through the sword and jackboots of an army but by Jesus suffering on the Cross.

It is peace with God. The barriers are broken down, and the relationship of peace between God and humans is now possible.

Moreover, that peace between God and people leads to peace between people in the community of the kingdom that we call the church. And so the church witnesses to God's alternative kingdom that is so strikingly different from the Roman Empire. Instead of peace by subjugation, we have peace by suffering. Instead of peace by force, we have peace by putting others' needs ahead of our own.

It becomes a question for us as a church: not only have we individually found peace with God through Jesus justifying us at the Cross, but also do we live out God's life of peace together in fellowship? Are the quality of our relationships a sign of God's kingdom, in contrast to the ways of empire that surround us?

Secondly, Jesus brings grace.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. (Verses 1-2)

'Gaining access' and 'standing' are clues that what Paul has in mind here is a room that Jesus has brought us into with the Father. It's like coming not just generally to the Temple but specifically to the altar with a sacrifice. But that sacrifice is of course Jesus himself and we now stand in a place where we experience 'grace' not as a one-off encounter with the forgiveness we don't deserve but more as an ongoing expression of God's continuing love.³

Just think of that for a moment. The grace that Jesus brings us into is so vast that we stand and remain in it – well, we do, unless we choose to walk out on it.

That is why Paul says ‘we boast in the hope of the glory of God’, because God’s intention is to have us in his temple of grace for all time. We have something to enjoy now and to look forward to. This gives us hope. It’s based on God’s enduring love.

When things get bad in ministry, I sometimes look forward to retirement – perhaps more and more as I get older! The knowledge that we have a house in Sussex is something that tells me life will not always be like this in the bad times.

The followers of Jesus celebrate the good news that he ushers us into the presence of a God who has not promised to love us ‘until we are parted by death’, as the marriage service says, but ‘for ever and ever.’

Be encouraged! Jesus gives us a firm foundation by grace in the love of God.

And from that firm foundation let us be prepared to take risks in his name, rather than forever playing it safe.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit helps us to love.

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Verses 3-5)

As I said, things may be tough, but with the enduring presence of God’s love and grace, we have hope. And so Paul goes on to explain how we are enabled to endure, because we have hope.

And so we come to the point where Paul says that the hope we grow into does not disappoint us, ‘because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’

‘God’s love.’ The Greek literally says, ‘the love of God’, and most translators, like the NIV, take it that way. But it could be translated ‘our love for God’, and given that the context is things we do, such as suffer and persevere, I (following N T Wright on this point⁴) favour that translation.

This would mean that what Paul is talking about here is that the Holy Spirit enables us to love God, especially during those times when we persevere and suffer, leading to the formation of our character and hope.

For in the difficult times it is often harder to love God. When we are up against and we want to complain, love is farthest from our minds. Yet we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength, and there are no get-out clauses.

Loving God does not always come naturally or easily. But the good news Paul tells us is that this is one reason the Holy Spirit is sent to us: to help us to love.

And that takes us full circle. The peace of God is not just a personal gift but something we live out in community as an alternative kingdom, doing so reassured that Jesus has brought us into the place of God's enduring grace and love. But living out that love is difficult. We cannot do it alone. For this we receive the Holy Spirit.

Thus the Trinity is intimately involved in the whole life of Christians, and the Christian community.

¹ What follows is based on Darrell W Johnson, *Experiencing The Trinity*; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002, pp 41-45.

² N T Wright, 'Romans' in *The Interpreter's Bible Volume X*; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, p 515.

³ Wright, p 516.

⁴ Wright, p 517.