

The Trinity

Week 3 ^{Luke 2:14} Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

A study in three parts

For our final week we will look at occasions in the Gospel where we see the 'sharing of the Trinity' in the 'full revelation' of God in the personhood of Jesus.

As we look at some of the incidents of Jesus life and the way in which they express the nature of the Trinity, we need to also remember the purpose of creation.



To the Glory of God

The purpose of any action of God is to reveal God's glory. Glory in itself is a complicated term as it translates a Hebrew word known as K-B-D. Because of the nature of vowels to alter words, K-B-D could mean bright light, but also weight and heaviness that one could associate with a solemn promise, a heavy heart, or the immovability of a stone. Different vowel attributes to these three consonants can change it's intended meaning quite markedly.

What 'Glory' is then, is not necessarily exhibiting a bright radiance (although that is a particular experience), but also the understanding of the totality of God: that everything which happens is for God's purpose and by His will. When we do things to the glory of God, we do so knowing that God's glory is revealed by the ability we have in the Spirit to do work that is ultimately caused by Him.

Living in a community of Trinity

Jesus' birth

Consider the narrative of Jesus birth in Luke 2:1-20. What is the purpose of the angel Gabriel's visit? And the other angels? How does the angel's song show the significance of the birth of Jesus?

Jesus' baptism

Consider the account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17. How is the Trinity, its one substance and three personas, expressed? How does Jesus reveal fully the expression and nature of the Trinitarian God?

Jesus' healing

Consider the miracle of Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8:22-25. How did the encounter happen? What was the result? How does the Spirit and Father become expressed in this encounter?

Jesus' death and resurrection

The fulcrum of our existence lies towards the end of each Gospel account. In Matthew 27:45 - 28:10, we have a particular account of Jesus' death. How is the Trinity expressed by the *persona* of Jesus in his death? How are they revealed in the resurrection?

More modern thoughts

Different theologians have worked on the Trinity over the past 50 years (many have done so over the past two millennia), each trying to look at the mystery from a different angle. Most theologians are trying to deconstruct the 'greekness' of Tertullian, whilst continuing to arrive at a similar framework that operates within the experience and scripture that God has provided us.

Schleiermacher is a theologian who has worked on a dependant model of God from human nature, with his conclusion being that of the Trinity.

Jürgen Moltmann has also done work on the social dependencies within the Trinity and the relative independence of the three in how they operate, especially the Holy Spirit. This is based on *perichoresis*. Moltmann develops a theology around how human societies should work, deconstructing the idea on monarchy within the role of godhead.

Eberhard Jüngel has spent time working on the differentiating theology and the Trinity from the view of secular metaphysics.

Conclusion

The role of the Trinity has an impact of how we view ourselves, the church, society as a whole and human history. The way in which we understand the Trinity should have profound implications on who we are as Christians and the way in which we read the bible. Remember - one being, one substance, three persons, one God.

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Week 2 ^{2 Corinthians 13:13} The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

A scriptural approach to understanding the Trinity

As mentioned last week, there Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 are the only explicit mentions of the Trinity, with the Great Commission and the Grace. However the Trinity is found in the pattern of divine activity through the New Testament.



Compare and discuss the following verses and how a pattern of God acting as Trinity is revealed. See also how they tie into the Gospels.

1 Corinthians 12:4, Galatians 4:6, Titus 3:4, 1 Peter 1:2

As we can see, in each of these passages there is an experience of the three persons in each. We may think of other instances, such as the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

However, in our understanding of the economy of salvation we find that the Trinity didn't simply appear with Jesus conception, between 7 and 4 BC. Wisdom, the Word of God and the Spirit of God are all terms which balance together with the Christian understanding of Trinity.

A First Testament approach.

Rather than 'Old' we might experience God as Trinity in the 'First Testament'. Biblical Scholarship likes to make this particular distinction.

- Wisdom (such is found in Proverbs 1:20-3, and Job 28), is independent, yet dependent on the Creator God.
- God's speech is its own entity again dependant but yet differentiated such as in Psalms 119:89, Psalm 147:15-20 and Isaiah 55:10-11.
- The Spirit of God is present in multiple instances, we can see particular inferences to the Messiah in Isaiah 42:1-3, and also the agent of the new creation in Ezekiel 26:36 and 37:1-14.

Perichoresis and Appropriation

As discussed last session, *perichoresis* is a term that describes the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. How the church defines this is at the heart of the of the East/West split in the Filioque Controversy. *I need to note that my teaching last session was wrong, and that the East split from the West. Apologies!*

Appropriation is a development of *perichoresis*. A particular heresy called Modalism suggests that God operates in different "modes of being" during the economy of salvation, that God stopped Creating to Save as the Son. However the Doctrine of *Appropriation* suggests that all three persons are active in each activity in the economy. There is a caveat though: it is appropriate to see that Creation is the Father's work. We see that the Son and the Spirit share in that. Similarly, redemption is the work of the Son, yet the Father and the Spirit share in that too. The work of the Spirit in the church today allows us to experience Creator's love and act in redemption. We might consider it again to be the antithesis of a metaphor of liquid, ice, gas example that the ice and steam don't share in the action of liquid.

Heresy - Tritheism

This heresy is fairly obvious, and we might be concerned with it when we insist on praying to Jesus, or praying to the Holy Spirit in that they might be independent.

Heresy - Modalism

Essentially modalism was introduced by German Theologian Adolf von Harnack. As described above, he suggested that as part of the economy of salvation, God interacts differently at different times during the order. Think perhaps of God as a Transformer robot from comics, toys and movies. This was developed as a push against Tritheism. Modalism essentially states that there are three terms for the same God. This is turn can be split into Chronological and Functional modalism, that God changes modes over time, or God functions as a particular modes depending on need.

Our final week will look at occasions in the Gospel where we might see the 'sharing of the Trinity' in the 'Full revelation' of God in the personhood of Jesus.

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Week 1 ^{1 Corinthians 13:12} For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Paul was writing to address controversy as to the importance of particular spiritual gifts, and how they are to be used. Along with this he gives us this 'soundbite' that expresses a truth.

Words to consider in this passage:

meros [part; or one of several; or individually]

teleois [complete; perfect; finished; or if describing a man then full grown, adult, mature]

Discussion: What might this say about our understanding of God and how we understand?

When will we come to fully know and understand God?

Pair this up with a passage from John 14:1-13, specifically verses 7, 9 and 11.

Discussion: How should this impact on how we understand who God is?

When we consider the Trinity, we believe that the nature of God is three 'persons' of the same substance. That is not to say, three separate ethereal spirits made of the same ether. They are one and the same. Even using a metaphor of ice, water and steam doesn't capture the same level of understanding.

As Christians we understand that whilst we might not know the face, nor the will of God, we understand that Jesus was a full revelation of God. To know Jesus therefore is to know God. The early church dealt with several controversies. One of these was over the nature of Christ, whether Jesus was divine or human.

Today, we understand Jesus to be both, but only because of the work the early church did on the matter.

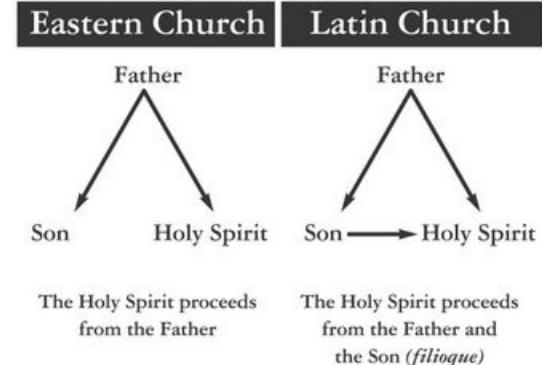
Tertullian was a theologian who worked hard on discovering the nature of God. His creation of a language to describe the nature of God helps the church today. Some of the words he created (in Latin) include *Trinitas*, *Persona* [which is more literally means a mask rather than person], and *Substantia*.



Tertullian also was the first to set the terms of the debate of how the Trinity might work. He coined the term 'economy of salvation' - which means how salvation is ordered.

But even Tertullian based his own reasoning and theology within scripture. Matthew 29:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:13 are the only explicit mentions of the Trinity as we have it. However the Trinity is found in the pattern of divine activity to which the Gospels and Acts explicitly lay it out (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit). See: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Galatians 4:6, Titus 3:4-6, 1 Peter 1:2. Next session we will spend some more time on these.

The *Filioque* Controversy



The Greek term *perichoresis* is a concept developed around the sixth century to describe how the aspects of the Trinity relate to one another. Each aspect is individual (personas) but all three share in the life of the other. It led to the splitting of the church between East and West and causes the main division of theology across the broader church. However, in the light of over a millennium of coexisting, Protestants tend to have more heated arguments about lesser issues!

The main difference is how we read recite the Nicene Creed:

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and* the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.

Discussion: How is this understanding important for political thought, and how does each describe a model Christian Community?