

One God, Three Persons [Deuteronomy 6:4 & Matthew 28:19]

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Big Idea: The God we worship is not who the world says He is and getting that right is where everything else begins.

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// INTRODUCTION

²⁴“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵Though the rain comes in torrents, and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. ²⁷When the rains and floods come, and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.” [Matthew 7:24-27]

Jesus tells a story about two builders. Both of them heard the same words, and both built a house. What distinguished them wasn’t their engineering skills... it wasn’t their hard work...it wasn’t even their passion. The difference was what they built ON. ***The difference was their foundation.***

One was built on rock, and the other was built on sand. When the rain came, the waters rose, and the winds blew; only one of them was left with a house that withstood the storm. ***The same storm hit both houses, but the one that was built on a firm foundation survived.***

This story is your invitation over the next 9-weeks.

We live in a time when the ground beneath our lives is continually shifting. The world tells us that TRUTH IS PERSONAL. That FAITH IS WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE. That the things that matter most are whatever you FEEL RIGHT NOW. That might work in good weather, when things are going well. ***But when a storm hits your life, you find out quickly what your life is actually built on.***

This church, ACAC, has stood for 132 years. And it hasn’t been because the people who gathered here were extraordinary. It hasn’t been because we haven’t been hit with storms; we have. ***It’s lasted and weathered the storms because the God this church was built on is faithful.*** His Word is true, and His people have built their lives on a firm foundation.

The purpose of this sermon series isn’t for you to just learn about this foundation. It’s not to make you a better debater or to just give you more information. ***It’s important because what you believe about God will show up in how you live.*** It’ll

show up in how you handle suffering ... how you make decisions... and how you respond when life doesn't go as planned.

Over the next 9-weeks, we're going to look at the core doctrines of the Christian faith: the Trinity, the person and work of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, sin, salvation, the Spirit-filled life, healing, the Church, and the return of Jesus. These aren't just things we believe; they are the load-bearing walls of everything we stand on.

We're starting this week with the cornerstone of this foundation because if you get this one wrong, everything else you build on it will be shaky. Today, we start with One God, Three Persons: The Trinity.

// THE QUESTION

Before we dive into what the doctrine of the Trinity is, I want to name the question it actually answers. Because again, this isn't an academic exercise; it's starting with a question that people wrestle with...

Who is God, and is He a God who really wants to know me?

Most people here already have some kind of instinct about God.

- Some of you picture a distant, authoritative figure. He's there but not close. He's all-powerful but not very personal.
- Some of you have embraced a Star Wars picture of God... a spiritual force, cosmic energy, or whatever you need Him to be in the moment.
- Some of you grew up with a God who felt more like a judge than a Father.
- Some of you here aren't sure what to think.

// WHAT WE'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED

Let me give you a definition of what we mean when we say, "*One God, Three Persons or the Trinity*," and then I'll unpack it.

There is one God. He has existed eternally as three distinct persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Not three gods. Not one God wearing three different masks. ***Three distinct persons, one divine essence.*** Each person is fully God, yet genuinely distinct from one another. One God, three persons.

Now, here's something I want to address because someone may have said this to you before and you didn't know how to respond.... ***The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible.***

If you've ever had someone use that to try to dismiss the Trinity like, "*that word's not even in the Bible, so how can you believe it?*" I want you to know how to respond because it's simple.

- The word "Trinity" was first used by an early church theologian named Tertullian around 200 AD.
- He coined the Latin term "trinitas" to describe what he saw revealed consistently throughout Scripture: ***The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. And there is only ONE God.***
- He needed a word to hold that all together, and "trinitas" or "Trinity" was the word he landed on.

We don't believe in the Trinity because of the word. We believe in it because of what the Bible shows us.

Think about it this way... the word "Bible" actually isn't in the Bible. However, neither is the word "monotheism" or even "missionary." ***We use words that aren't in the Bible to describe what the Bible teaches all of the time.*** The word is just a label or a description. The doctrine is what matters. And the doctrine of the Trinity is simply the most faithful description of what the Bible reveals about who God is.

Here's another way to think about it... the word "gravity" wasn't used until Isaac Newton, but things fell to the ground long before anyone had a name for it. ***The Trinity was true before Tertullian gave it a name.*** What the early church did was look at everything Scripture said about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and ask, "*What's the most faithful way to describe what we're seeing?*" The answer was the doctrine of the Trinity. ***They didn't invent it; they received it from Scripture and worked hard to communicate it clearly.***

// BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Let's just look at a few examples from the Bible because this doctrine doesn't come from tradition or church councils; it comes from Scripture.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [Deuteronomy 6:4]

This is what's known as the Shema. It's the heartbeat of OT theology. The Jewish people recited this twice a day. God is one. Christianity doesn't abandon the Shema; we build on it. ***The mystery of the Trinity doesn't contradict the oneness of God; it deepens our understanding of what that oneness is.*** God is one, but that oneness is rich and relational.

Let's jump to the NT. Jesus is giving His disciples their final instructions, and He says...

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Matthew 28:19]

Notice what He says... Not "in the NAMES" (plural). Not even "in MY name." He says, "in the NAME" (singular). ***One name, and that name belongs to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.*** Jesus is revealing the nature of the God in whose authority He is sending His disciples out into the world.

We see the Trinity elsewhere in the Bible...

- ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [John 1:1]***
 - John reveals Jesus as the Word, and He was with God from the very beginning.
- In John 14, ***Jesus distinguishes Himself from the Father and promises a third...*** the Spirit of truth, who will come and live inside of you. Three persons.
- In 2 Corinthians, Paul closes a letter with a benediction with ***the names of all three persons in their distinct roles...*** *the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*
- Go all the way back to the beginning in Genesis 1... God says, ***"Let US make mankind in OUR image."*** ***A plurality within the Godhead before a single human being ever was created.***

The Trinity isn't a NT invention. It's been there the whole time.

Here's something significant for us to consider today... The Church has been confessing this doctrine for nearly 2000 years.

- In 325 AD, church leaders gathered at a place called Nicaea to settle what was, at that time, the most important question the church had ever faced...***Who is Jesus, exactly?***

- There was a man named Arius who was teaching that Jesus was a created being, the greatest gift of all God's creations, but a creation, not fully God.
- The early church understood that if Jesus is anything less than full God, the Gospel collapses. You can't be saved by a creature; only God can do what Jesus did. ***If Jesus is not fully God, the cross doesn't accomplish what the cross claims to accomplish.***
- What they concluded became known as the Nicene Creed, something still confessed by Christians in churches around the world every Sunday. ***This isn't my theology, ACAC's theology, or even our denomination's theology; it's the Church's theology.***

// WHERE IT CAN GO WRONG

I need to talk about some ways even well-meaning Christians can get this wrong because some of these errors are more common than we realize. Some are even being taught in churches without people knowing it.

MODALISM

The most common mistake, and one I'm going to spend a little more time on, is called ***modalism***. The idea is that Father, Son, and Spirit are NOT three simultaneously distinct persons... they're different roles or modes that one God plays at different times. God was the Father in the OT. He became the Son in the incarnation. And now He's the Spirit in the Church age.

It can sound reasonable, but it has a massive problem. If that's true, then when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, praying "***Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me,***" He was talking to Himself. There was no one to hear it. There was no genuine relationship there to the Father. If that's the case, then the cross wasn't a real act of substitution, and that's not the Gospel. ***The Gospel requires a genuine distinction between the Father and the Son.***

Here's why I'm spending time on this... Some of the most popular illustrations people use to explain the Trinity actually teach modalism. You've probably even heard some of them.

- ***The water, ice, and steam analogy...*** One substance, three forms. That may sound helpful, but it teaches modalism because in that illustration, water isn't simultaneously water, ice, and steam. It shifts from one to the other. The three forms are just modes of the same thing. Not persons in relationship.

TRITHEISM

The opposite danger is what's called ***tritheism***... thinking of the Father, Son, and Spirit as three separate divine individuals who cooperate. Three gods who work well together.

This is actually what many Muslims and Jews assume Christians believe. It's worth being able to tell them that's NOT what we believe. There is ONE divine essence, one will, one power... shared fully and equally by THREE distinct persons. They are not a committee. They are not a team of three. They are ONE God.

- ***The commonly used egg illustration falls into this trap...*** the shell, egg white, and egg yolk. Each part is 1/3 of the egg. The problem is the Father isn't 1/3 of God. The Son isn't 1/3 of God, and the Spirit isn't 1/3 of God. Each person is FULLY God.

TREATING THE HOLY SPIRIT AS AN "IT" RATHER THAN A "HE"

Another way we can go sideways is by depersonalizing the Holy Spirit. ***Treating HIM as a force, feeling, or some kind of divine energy rather than a fully divine being.*** It can show up in the language we use when we say things like, *"IT moved over the waters, or IT came upon the people at Pentecost."* It can subtly show up when we relate to the Spirit as a power to access rather than a person to know.

A force doesn't comfort you. A force doesn't intercede for you. A force can't be grieved. ***A person does all of those things.*** We'll come back to this in week 3 when we talk about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. But for now, the Holy Spirit is a HE, not an IT.

The Trinity is what makes Christianity categorically different from every other major religion in the world.

- ***Islam*** holds that God is absolutely one. Any suggestion of persons within the Godhead is considered a severe sin.
- ***Mormonism*** teaches that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three separate divine beings.
- ***Much of popular American*** spirituality pictures God as some kind of divine force.

The Trinity is the dividing line between the God of the Bible and every other substitute.

// WHY THIS MATTERS

Let me talk now about why this matters. Not just for your theology, but for your actual life.

Let me start by asking you a question. Sit with this for just a minute. Scripture tells us that *“God is love.”* **Why IS God love?** Not simply, DOES He love—but **why is love His very nature? What makes love something He is and not just something He does?**

If God is essentially only one person, alone, before any of creation, then before He made anything, there was no one to love. God could not BE love if there was no one TO love. **Love would be something He acquired once He had an object for His affection.** Love would be His behavior, not His nature. He would HAVE love, but He wouldn’t BE love.

This is the God of Islam. Allah is absolutely one, and in classical Islamic theology, before creation, there was no one for Allah to love. Love is not his nature; it is his action towards creation.

The God of the Bible is different. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed eternally in a relationship of self-giving, outflowing love. Before a single galaxy existed, before there was ever a single human breath, the Father was loving the Son. The Son was delighting in the Father, the Spirit was the bond and the expression of that love.

So, when 1 John 1:9 says, *“God is love,”* **that’s a Trinitarian statement.** With the Trinity, love is not something God does; it’s who He is.

Think about this... **If God is alone, then creation is puzzling. Why would a completely self-sufficient God create anything?** The usual answers make God sound needy, like He wanted people to worship Him. He desired relationship. He needed something to love. **But a God who needs something is NOT the God of the Bible.**

The Triune God doesn’t create out of need; He creates out of abundance. The Father who has always been loving the Son is simply the kind of God who creates, loves, and redeems, because that’s who He’s always been. Creation isn’t God satisfying an itch. Creation is love spilling over.

The same logic applies to salvation. God doesn’t save us because He’s obligated to. He doesn’t save us because He needs us. He saves us because the God who is eternally loving by nature cannot look at broken image-bearers without moving toward them. The Gospel is the overflow of who God’s always been.

**** BOOK: *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves ****

// HOW THIS SHAPES HOW WE LIVE

The whole point of this series isn't to fill your head with doctrinal knowledge. It's to show you how it should shape your daily life. *Let me give you three ways it does...*

1. The Trinity redefines who you are.

I reference this passage often, but in John 17, right before Jesus goes to the cross, He prays for you. He literally says, *"I'm not just praying for these disciples, but for all who will believe in me through their message."* Here's what He prays...

²¹I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you, And may they be in us. [John 17:21]

Jesus isn't just using the Trinity as a metaphor for church unity. He's describing what salvation actually does to a person. **Through union with Jesus, you are drawn into the relational life of the Trinity itself.** The Father loves you as He loves the Son. John 17:23 says that explicitly, the Spirit who has been the bond of Trinitarian love from eternity now lives inside of you.

You are not simply a follower of Jesus trying to be a better person. You are not primarily a sinner just trying to stay forgiven. ***The deepest and most foundational thing about you, if you are in Jesus, is that you have been brought into the eternal fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*** That's who you are now. That's your identity.

2. The Trinity reshapes how you pray.

When you pray, who are you talking to? Most people, if they're honest, pray to a vague God. Some kind of authoritative figure they make their requests to.

But the NT gives our prayers a specific shape.

¹⁸Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. [Ephesians 2:18]

Because of Jesus, we have access to the Father through the Spirit. You pray to the Father, who already loves you before you even speak. You pray through Jesus, whose righteousness gives you the right to approach the Father. You pray in the Spirit, who is already interceding within you, already praying on your behalf [Romans 8:26], and already offering words when you can't find them yourself.

Understanding the Trinity gives our prayer the proper shape. ***You're approaching the Father who has been waiting for you, through the Son [Jesus] who has already made the way, in a Spirit who is already at work in you.***

That's prayer built on a strong foundation.

3. The Trinity is the basis of Christian community.

Because God is Himself a community of love, the Church is not just a gathering of individuals who happen to share some common beliefs. It's meant to reflect, however imperfect it may be, the relational life of God Himself.

The Trinity is the source of our community. 132 years of ACAC being here in the North Side isn't just institutional longevity. ***It's the evidence of a community formed by God who has always been in relationship, always been faithful, and always been moving toward people.***

The Trinity isn't a doctrine you master, it's a reality you're invited into. It should define your identity, shape your prayer, and help you recognize you are part of a larger family.

// PRAY

// BENEDICTION / NICENE CREED [Read together]

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation

he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy, universal, and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.