



An Introduction to the Trinity

Selected Scriptures

GraceLife: May 27, 2007

© 2007 by Don Green. All rights reserved.

The past three weeks, I have completed a study on the deity of Christ from the gospel of John. What I want to do this morning is to kind of take that to the next step and talk about the implication for that – for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in general.

Now, most of you would affirm that you believe in the Trinity. But sometimes it is harder to point to biblical reasons why you believe something. And as we deal with Jewish people, as we deal with others who claim to be monotheists and yet deny the Trinity, it is important for us to be able to understand why it is that we believe what we believe. And so we are going to spend this morning looking at the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now let me open with this very important statement that is fundamental. If you will grasp this starting point as we study the doctrine of the Trinity, I think most everything else will follow. *When you study the nature of God, when you look deep into the essence of God as it were, you should expect to find things that are beyond your understanding.* Any theology, any approach to truth, that says, “I want something that I can fully understand without remainder – to put it in a box as it were and say I understand it” – that is wrong by definition; it could not possibly be true.

Psalm 145:3, for example, says,

Great is the Lord and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.

It goes beyond the capacity of the human mind to seek it out to its fullest extent.

In Isaiah 55:8-9, a familiar passage, the Lord is speaking – it says:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

When we come to approach the living God; when we come to approach the uncreated Creator of the universe, we should have it in our mind that the closer we study and the more and the deeper that we look, we are going to find things that are not irrational, that are not illogical, but things that go beyond our understanding; things that we can think on and kind of grasp a little bit and then we say, “I’ll bet there are other aspects of this that I don’t get.” That’s what it means for God to be unsearchable, for His ways and His

essence to be higher than ours. And there are few things that bring us face to face with that more than the doctrine of the Trinity.

Charles Spurgeon appreciated this point when he said:

We can never understand how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit can be three and yet one. I have long ago given up any desire to understand this great mystery, for I am perfectly satisfied that if I could understand it, it would not be true because God from the very nature of things must be incomprehensible.

That's exactly right; if it was something that I could understand and get my mind around, then my mind would become the measure of who God is – that couldn't possibly be true. And so as we approach this doctrine, we are going to have things that transcend what you and I can't understand. Don't let that dissuade you; don't let that frustrate you; don't let that drive you into matters of error. Just keep in mind this simple thought. You – and I say this in love and I include myself in this "you" – you can no more fit the vastness of God's essence into your mind than you could fit the ocean into a tea cup. God simply transcends us. He is transcendent, He is glorious, He is incomprehensible. And so yes, we are going to find things that we wrestle to understand even on a preliminary basis.

Let me give you this definition of the Trinity – this definition of the Trinity that we are just going to unfold with scripture passages in the rest of our time together:

There is one true God who has only one essence, who eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three persons are each fully and equally God and they equally deserve worship and obedience. Yet these three persons are only one God.

This is the synthesis of the biblical teaching on the nature of God as He is within His own being.

What I want to do is to break down that definition into three basic principles for you and then give you some basic scriptures to support them. Because what I want from this, and something that I didn't have for very long time as I struggled with this issue as a young Christian was I never had something that I could just walk through on my own, sit down and go through the scriptures and say, "Okay, I see this." It is not enough for us to say that we are Trinitarian in our belief and to just assert that dogmatically. You that sit in the pew need to and have the responsibility to be able to articulate this on some basic level for yourself. And so that's why we are doing this here this morning.

1. There Is One True God

Now the Bible repeatedly emphasizes this point—there is only one God. Let me give you just a couple of verses each from the Old Testament and the New Testament to orient your thinking. This isn't much in dispute in our circles, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it, but it is just necessary to have a thorough survey of this doctrine.

A. Old Testament emphasis

In the Old Testament, let me give you a couple of verse references from Deuteronomy for you to jot down; Deuteronomy 4:35 and Deuteronomy 6:4. Verse 35 says:

To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God, there is no other besides Him.

Deuteronomy 6:4, the famous Shema passage:

Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!

And so in the Old Testament, you have this emphasis that there is only one God, over against the polytheism that dominated the cultures of that day.

B. New Testament emphasis

When you go to the New Testament, you see this mentioned also, it is not ignored in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 8:4 – the Apostle Paul writes,

We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

James 2:19 – it's not just that we are monotheists: demons are also – James 2:19 says,

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

And so, Christianity insists upon the emphatic fact that there is only one God. Monotheism is central to understanding the Trinity. Despite what Muslims would accuse us of, we do not believe in three gods, we believe that there is one God. We need to keep that firmly in mind as we come to the second principle in today's message. First principle: There is one true God, stated clearly and emphatically in the Old and the New Testaments.

2. God Eternally Exists in Three Persons

The Bible compels us to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. You can't accept the Bible and reject the Trinity – the Bible drives you there. If your fundamental starting presupposition is that the Bible is the inspired word of God, it compels you to believe in the Trinity, because as it teaches that there is one God, it also teaches us that He exists in three persons. So this point is going to have three sub points:

A. The Father is God

In John 6:27, Jesus said:

Work for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him, the Father, God, has set His seal.

There are a lot of other verses that we could look at. Romans 1:7 says:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so the Bible refers to the person of the Father as God. Very clearly, undiluted, undiminished, unquestionably, the Father is God; He is the first member of the Trinity and only groups like the United Pentecostals would even dispute that point – for all intents and purposes, in those that would loosely try to call themselves Christians.

B. The Son is God

That's the whole point that I've been establishing over the past three weeks, so I'm not going to repeat anything here. John 1:1:

The Word was with God and the Word was God.

Now notice – and we'll come back to this – notice that in that statement, in that phrase, “The Word was with God and the Word was God,” you have a distinction of persons between the Father and the Son and yet, you have full equality with them; the Father is God, the Son is God, and yet there is a distinction which allows them to have a personal relationship – that is intrinsic to our understanding of the Trinity. The Father is God; the Son is God; third sub-point here in “God eternally exists in three persons” is this:

C. The Holy Spirit is God

For this, I want you to turn to the book of Acts chapter 5. We will look at a couple of verses more closely about the Holy Spirit because we haven't spent any prior time on this. The Holy Spirit is God. Acts chapter 5, beginning in verse 3. You remember the story, how Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property. They kept some of the sales proceeds and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. Look at verse 3:

Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.”

Notice the parallel. In verse 3, Peter says, “Ananias, you lied to the Holy Spirit.” In verse 4, he makes the equation, “You have not lied to men, but you have lied to God.” And so lying to the Holy Spirit is equated with lying to God. That can only be true if the Holy Spirit Himself is God – the Holy Spirit is God.

Now with that in mind, turn back to Psalm 139 as well. Couple of other verses that I want you to see here. Psalm 139:7 says this:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

And so he addresses God and says, “Where can I go from your Spirit?” And as he does this, he is expressing the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit. Omnipresence is a unique, incommunicable attribute of God and David says, “Everywhere I go, Your Spirit is there.” That could only be true if the Spirit was God and therefore, we believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of this Trinity, this third person who is equally God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now, let’s back up for a moment. Every preaching class that you could ever take, almost every book that you would read on preaching, would tell you how important it is to give an illustration of the truth that you are trying to teach. And one of the things that I want to do here is to help you understand the relationship of illustrations and analogies to the doctrine of the Trinity. The fact of the matter is that there is no good analogy from something created to the Trinity, something that we can see and know in our earthly experience that compares to the pre-existence eternal nature of the Triune God. What are you going to compare the Triune God to?

Some have tried to illustrate the Trinity by comparing it to water. They say that you can have the same quantity of water, and it could be ice if the temperature was cold enough, liquid water, or steam. And therefore, you have these three things from one substance. But listen, that is not a good analogy to the Trinity at all. That illustrates a false doctrine because water does not exist in all three of those forms at the same time. The water example only illustrates the false doctrine of modalism which says God is one person who appears to us in three different forms at three different times. What the doctrine of the Trinity says is that there is one God with one true essence and at the same time He eternally exists in three persons, father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is different from saying water can be different forms depending on the temperature that it is.

No. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are simultaneously one hundred per cent God in one indivisible essence. That’s going to lead us to our third principle for today. Our first principle was, there is one true God; second, God eternally exists in three persons. And now we kind of complete the circle and say:

3. These Three Persons Are One God

I want to take you to a few different passages to illustrate this and hopefully clarify some of this a little bit better. You will see these three persons are repeatedly placed on equal standing:

A. At Jesus’ Baptism

“An Introduction to the Trinity”
 © 2007 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
 thegracelifepulpit.com

First of all at Jesus' baptism. Turn to Matthew chapter 3. And again, what we are trying to do here is to simply survey this, not deal with the myriad of discussions that we could go into as we talk about this. At Jesus' baptism, you see that these three persons are one God. Matthew chapter 3, beginning in verse 16 – John was baptizing Jesus, and in verse 16:

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water. And behold, the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

And so at Jesus' baptism, you see all three members of the Trinity operating at the same time. The Father speaks His words of affirmation upon His beloved Son. Jesus is baptized at the hands of John the Baptist and the Spirit of God descends like a dove upon Jesus. And what that helps us see about the nature of the Trinity is it helps us distinguish the persons within the Godhead. They exist simultaneously with each other, and yet they have different functions at different times. They relate to one another, they speak to one another, and this relational dynamic is one reason why we refer to the individuals of the Trinity as persons, but they are distinct, they function differently at different times, all the while achieving the same united purpose of the essence of God.

B. In the Great Commission

Now, another place where you see this clearly is in Matthew chapter 28 in the Great Commission. Turn to Matthew 28 if you will. This is after the resurrection – beginning in verse 16:

The eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. – verse 19 – Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them – get this – in the name – singular person – in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Read that very, very carefully. In verse 19, where Jesus says, "baptizing them in *the* name" – one name, consistent with the reality that there is one God. And yet, notice in what follows that there are three persons associated with that name; each one distinguished by a separate use of the article: "in the name" – one name, one God – "of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" – three persons, one name. This is an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is why the doctrine of the Trinity is what explains why Jesus could talk about the name of God in the singular, and yet associate plurality with that one name.

C. In Christian Blessings

"An Introduction to the Trinity"
 © 2007 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
 thegracelifepulpit.com

Final passage that I want to take you to here is in 2 Corinthians chapter 13. We'll try to tie all of this together. In 2 Corinthians 13:14, at the end of his epistle, notice what the apostle Paul says:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

The blessings of God, of grace, of love, and fellowship are coming from three different persons on an equal basis all at the same time: one God, three persons dispensing His goodness to believers. They each relate to creation while retaining their full deity at all times.

Now with all of that said, let me talk about another illustration that you have probably heard, that could not possibly be accurate as a description of the Trinity, and the way that you eat breakfast will prove my point that is not a good illustration.

Some people like to use the analogy of an egg to describe the Trinity. They say God is three in one like an egg is three in one. If it was an egg, you got the egg shell, you got the egg yoke, and you got the egg white – you've heard that before, right where people use that? That doesn't work either. How many of you would look at a plateful of scrambled eggs that had pieces of eggshell broken up into it, and say, "Yeah, I want to eat that." When you pick out the eggshells from your scrambled eggs, you are denying that analogy as being a proper representation of the Trinity; you never thought about that did you? The essence of the eggshell is not the essence of the yoke and that's why you don't eat it. The doctrine of the Trinity is something different. The doctrine of the Trinity says that these three persons are identical in their essence and nature – they share the same essence.

And so we have come full circle to this definition. There is one true God who has only one essence, who eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three persons are each fully and equally God and equally deserve worship and obedience, yet these three persons are only one God.

Now, please understand, that when we say this, people accuse Christians all the time of engaging in a contradiction. "You are saying that God is one, and you are saying that God is three – that is a contradiction," or so they say. But when they say that, they don't get it or they are intentionally misrepresenting it, because we are not saying that God is one in the same way that He is three. We are saying that there is one essence; or if I can be so loose with terminology, to say that there is one "stuff" that constitutes God. In His nature, in His essence, the stuff that makes up God is only one indivisible essence; and yet that essence is shared fully by three persons simultaneously; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So it is not a contradiction because we are saying one in a different sense than what we are saying three when we talk about God. Are you starting to get a headache yet?

Great theologian, Louis Berchhoff said this:

When we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence, all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension; it is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead.

Now, what does that mean? How do you bring anything personally applicable out of this? How does the doctrine of the Trinity relate to your walk with God on a daily basis? Let me suggest a couple of things:

First of all, in John 4:24, we have an obligation to wrestle with this doctrine at some level because we want to be true worshipers. When Jesus was talking to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:21, as He speaks about true worship to her, He says:

Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

If the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then you are under obligation to believe it and you are under obligation to worship God as Triune God – that is the only way that you can worship Him in truth. Those who deny the Trinity deny God for who He is, and their worship is in vain.

When you fall on your knees before God, when you think about God, you have to contemplate this great doctrine, contemplate this great God, and worship Him, and what it should do to you is this: As you do this and you say, “I just don’t get this; I can’t get my arms all the way around this” – when you are at that position, beloved, you are at a blessed position of blessing, because what that should do to you is, the way you respond to that in the presence of God is, “God, I see this in the scripture, but I don’t understand it; therefore, I humble myself before You.” And in the throne room of your heart, you look at God as it were and you say, “You are bigger than I am; You are greater than I am.” And you worship Him independent of your circumstances; you ascribe to Him the praise that is His for being incomprehensibly, unsearchably great and glorious, and you humble your heart before Him; and you bow before Him and you worship Him for who He is – it drives you to worship.

When you confess the Trinity, in other words, in part what you are doing is you are confessing the transcendent greatness of God; you are recognizing Him as being supreme, as being majestic, as being greater than you are, and you humble yourself before that. This humbles us in the presence of God. This doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately the true confession of everyone who comes to the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because part of the sanctifying process that God does, as He

“An Introduction to the Trinity”

© 2007 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
thegracelifepulpit.com

sanctifies you in the truth, you come to recognize Him for who He truly is. And the more and the longer you go after your profession of Christ, the more you should see yourself saying, “I don’t fully understand this, but this is who God is and I worship Him accordingly.” Those who actively deny it are merely professing their own lostness.

I remember reading something on the Internet of a guy who was denying the Trinity, denying the deity of Christ. And one of the ways that you can tell the false teacher is by the pride with which he carries himself. And this particular guy that I was reading, and this is so common for people to do, they’ll try to tell you, “You know, I’ve just weighed out all of this and I just wanted to study it by the Bible and I’ve studied for thousands of hours and I don’t see the Trinity in the Bible” – as if that supposed to intimidate you into silence and silence your questions of their false theology. Listen, don’t be persuaded by that; don’t be fooled by that. The Bible talks about people who are always learning but never come to the knowledge of the truth. And as they say, “This is not true; this is ridiculous; I can’t understand it, therefore, I reject it,” they are only manifesting the pride of their own heart. As Christians, we are glad to confess that we don’t fully understand this doctrine, because it is consistent with what we would expect from an incomprehensibly and unsearchably great God. We rejoice that He is greater than us.

And so, what we are saying is that this confession of the Trinity is where everyone who is truly come to the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; this is not only where they *will* come, this is where they *must* come. Jesus Christ died and rose again to fulfill the plan of the Father who sent Him. He bore our sins in His body on the cross, and when He ascended into heaven, He sent the Spirit to take that work and to apply it to those of us who believe. And that Spirit seals us and preserves us until the day that we are glorified with God in heaven.

The doctrine of the Trinity is at the core of your salvation. The Father sent the Son; the Son died to redeem you; the Spirit takes that work, opens your eyes, applies it to your heart, and seals you until the day of redemption. The last thing that you want to do is to deny that doctrine which is at the core of your salvation; rather, you say, “Father, I don’t understand all of this, but I see it in Your scriptures, and I love You for it.”

Have you received this great Christ and been joined to this great triune God? That’s the question that ultimately this leads us to. Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we are humbled before the greatness of Your character; the greatness of Your essence when we peer into the doctrine of the Trinity. It is though we are peering into the sun in all of its glory and find ourselves blinded by what we see, blinded in the sense that we can’t fully comprehend it, O God – blinded in the sense that its glory consumes us.

And yet Father, we look, and we behold Your glory, believing that as we behold Your glory, we are transformed from one image of glory into another and to increasing degrees of Christ-likeness as we behold You for who You really are and worship You according to the truth of Your nature. We gladly bow our knee, we gladly humble our

“An Introduction to the Trinity”

© 2007 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
thegracelifepulpit.com

heart, before You, our Father, confessing Your transcendent greatness over us that You have, an essence about You that we cannot fully comprehend. And in that moment of worship, in that moment of humility, Father, we give You the glory that is rightfully Yours and You so truly deserve.

We honor You as being the great Triune God, where every member was involved in procuring the reality of our salvation and preserving it until we see You in heaven. We thank you for that, Father. We worship You, and we ask You that You would continually give us deeper understanding into who You are that we might better and more purely worship You in spirit and truth.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.