



THE TRINITY

AN OVERVIEW

This study is adapted from 'What Makes Christians Different?'; Study 2 in *The Blueprint* study guide by Tony Payne and Philip Jensen (Matthias Media, 2009).

INTRODUCTION

In the market bazaar of modern thought, there are many things that make Christianity distinctive. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of these distinctives. The Trinity is a uniquely Christian idea, distinguishing us from all other philosophical and religious systems, as well as differentiating genuine and spurious Christianity.

It may be possible to arrive at monotheism from reflecting on our experience of life. In many cultures around the world, people have believed in the existence of one ultimate God, and this is hardly surprising, since the Bible tells us that God reveals his existence and power through the created order. However, the knowledge that this One God is at the same time three persons, can come only through the revelation of Scripture. The One God is not a *simple* unity, but a *complex* unity of Father, Son and Spirit. We could never conceive of such a thing, except by God's revealing it to us in his word.

The Trinity is affirmed in several creedal statements that have formed a foundational part of the church's confessional life throughout the centuries. Two key examples are the Nicene Creed, which was originally drafted in 325 AD (at the First Council of Nicaea) and revised in 381 AD, and the Athanasian Creed (named after Athanasius, a central figure who defended the doctrine of the Trinity) which came together around the fifth century. Contemporary creedal expressions include the second statement of the AFES doctrinal basis, which affirms 'the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead'.

So: what are we to make of this 'mathematically unusual' idea? Indeed, if the word 'trinity' is not in the Bible, is it necessary or important for Christians to believe this doctrine? Where in the Bible do we get this understanding of God? And what difference does it make?

1. What do you think of when you hear the word 'trinity'?

- Have you ever tried explaining to someone that 'God is Trinity'?
- How did that go? And where in the Bible did you go?

2. What do the following Old Testament texts tell us about God?

Deuteronomy 6:4

Isaiah 45:5 (also vv.6,14,18,21-22)

3. What implications does this have for human worship of God?

We see similarly adamant affirmations of God's oneness in the New Testament. A Christian is one who turns 'from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Even the one referred to as 'the god of this age/world' (2 Cor 4:4) is not to be considered in any way God's equal. There may be angels and principalities and powers, but all of them have been created by the one true God and are under his sovereign control.

A COMPLEX UNITY

In the Old Testament

READ Genesis 1:26–27

4. What do you notice about the language used to talk about God?

5. Can you think of other indications in the Old Testament of the 'complex unity' of God?

Taken by themselves, these indications would not be sufficient for us to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, God's self-plural references may simply be examples of the 'royal plural' (used throughout time by monarchs to convey their general importance). However, given the way the New Testament develops the idea, these Old Testament indications of the 'complex unity' of the Godhead lay a clear groundwork for our fuller understanding.

In the New Testament

READ Matthew 28:16–20

6. What do you notice here regarding the identity of Jesus and God?

7. Look up these other New Testament texts to see what light they cast on Jesus' divinity:

John 1:1–3

Colossians 1:1–15 (cf. Col 2:9)

John 20:28–29

Mark 2:1–12

Revelation 5:12

The Holy Spirit is referenced many times in both Old and New Testament, both explicitly and implicitly. Some of the clearest explanations of the Spirit's personhood and work comes from Jesus' teaching in the upper room dialogue in John's Gospel.

READ John 16:5–15 (cf. 14:15–17, 25)

8. What does Jesus say about 'the Counsellor'? What is his connection to/relationship with the Father and Jesus?

The biblical understanding is that God is one and unique, and at the same time three persons – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – living and interrelating in undivided unity. Their complex unity is seen not only in their persons, and the titles they are given, but in the work they do. All three persons of the Godhead are involved in creation and redemption. The Father sends the Son and the Son seeks to do the will of the Father, and both the Father and the Son give the Spirit to us. The Father wasn't crucified – the Son was. There is a *distinction* between the persons of the triune God, but never a *division*, for the Father is in the Son, as the Son is in the Spirit.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Do the different persons of the Trinity have different 'functions'? How do they interrelate?
10. How might the doctrine of the Trinity affect the way:
- We determine what is most important in human life?

- We understand and approach our relationship with God?
- We understand and approach our relationship with fellow believers?
- We pray (what we pray and why)?
- We worship?
- We evangelise? For instance, how might you explain the Trinity to a Jehovah's Witness, a Jewish person or a Muslim?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Thank God that in Jesus, through the Spirit, we come to know him as he truly is.

Give thanks to God that as Father, Son and Spirit he has acted so that we might be forgiven and saved.

Ask God to keep giving you the biblical wisdom and insight to understand him as Trinity and to work out how to share the wonder of knowing God as he truly is with your family and friends.