

**Altavista Presbyterian Church**  
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**“The Trinity”**  
**Deuteronomy 6:4-7**  
**I Corinthians 8:4-6**  
**Matthew 28:18-20**

**Trinity Sunday**  
**June 11, 2017**

### **Deuteronomy 6:4-7**

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

### **I Corinthians 8:4-6**

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

### **Matthew 28:18-20**

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

### **“The Trinity”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I made up a joke that may or may not be funny. I believe that Christians are really bad at math. For some reason, somehow  $1+1+1=1$ . We’re really bad at it. If you were to put that as the answer on a test, you’ll likely lose points. How is that there is three in one and one in three? Well that’s actually quite a serious question to ask. If you haven’t figured by now, I’m talking about the Trinity. And it is indeed a serious doctrine, but one that is not fully understandable.

John Wesley is quoted as having said, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God.” What makes the Doctrine of the Trinity especially hard to comprehend is the simple fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is never addressed in Scripture. None of the authors expressly say, “this is the Trinity, this is how the three persons are related, and this is how three are in one.” This is one of the few doctrines of the faith that has Scriptural foundations but isn’t truly developed until three hundred years after Christ walked on this earth. It was around that time that the early church began to solidify. As the church began to grow and expand, it began to address big picture themes like theology and doctrine. The early Christians were truly orthodox in that Christianity was about right belief, *ortho-dox*. Biblical interpretation, just like today, brought forth ideologies and theories that were different from one another. The early church, then, had two responsibilities: to exercise fidelity to the Bible and to be clear on its orthodoxy.

The Bible, while it does not expressly use the word “trinity” does have within it the formula of the Triune God. We heard one example of it from the lips of Jesus himself when he commanded the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The Bible also says there is only one God, and only that God is to be worshiped. We heard that from Deuteronomy where Moses tells the people the Lord is One. If we are to take the Bible seriously, which most Christians do today and certainly did in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries, then we go back to our math problem. How is three in one?

This is where the terminology gets very complex. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God is one in essence and three in person. First of all let me say this is not a contradiction, as some other religious would have you believe. If God were to be one and not one (that is, three) *at the same time and in the same relationship*, then we would have a logical contradiction. The way in which God is one in essence is different than the way in which he is three in person. To be sure, this doctrine is mysterious and we cannot understand it fully. Yet that does not mean it is illogical. To better understand this, we need to define our terms.

When we say God is one in essence, we are affirming that God is one being. We believe that God exists and that God exists as one spiritual being. That is the only God we worship. God is one in existence. When we say God is three in person, we are affirming that there is a “different subsistence in the Godhead. A subsistence in the Godhead is a *real* difference but not an *essential* difference in the sense of a difference in *being*. Each person subsists or exists ‘under’ the pure essence of deity.”<sup>1</sup> Let me recap. The essence of God is one, that is he exists as one God alone. For some reason, which we cannot fully comprehend, God saw fit that we should experience him in three persons. God doesn’t do this arbitrarily. While all three persons participate in the work of salvation, “yet in the manner of activity, there are differing operations assumed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father initiates creation and redemption; the Son redeems the creation; and the Holy Spirit regenerates and sanctifies, applying redemption to believers.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the ages, in trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, men have often used analogies from the things we understand. A common one is the properties of H<sub>2</sub>O. We can experience water as a liquid, as solid ice, or as gaseous steam, but it remains hydrogen-dioxide. Another one is a person can be a parent, a child, and a spouse, but remain the same person. One from my childhood uses the sassafras tree. The sassafras has three distinct leaf shapes, a single leaf, a double leaf, and a triple leaf, yet it remains the same sassafras. All of the analogies we can think of to explain the Trinity are useful at a rudimentary level, but all breakdown upon further inspection. Burk Parsons notes, “we have been given the ability and the knowledge to understand all that God has intended for us to comprehend—and such comprehension comes only through faith given to us by God.”<sup>3</sup> God has revealed to us, through Scripture, the truth of the Trinity, but at the same time God has withheld some knowledge and understanding regarding the minutia of the Trinity. Some people might not like that, but it’s God prerogative to reveal to us what he delights in revealing.

Believing in the Trinity is not just about orthodoxy, however. While it is true that some things from God must be taken on faith alone, and the Trinity is one of those; it is also true that the Trinity has something to teach us today. Scripture teaches us that “God is love.” Not just that He is loving, but that God is, literally, love. And as the great poet and thinker Haddaway wrote in 1993, “What is love? Baby don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me no more.” Love is a union of distinct persons. Love,

like doctrine, can have heresies, as Haddaway so eloquently reminds us. Gene Veith says, “we can err in regards to the Trinity either by ‘confounding the persons’ (that is, smushing them all together into one) or by ‘dividing the substance’ (that is, separating the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into three deities).”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, love relationships can err by confounding the persons or dividing the substance. For instance, a wife wants her husband to be exactly like she is. She wants him to conform exactly to her will. She loves him, but in expecting him to conform to what she is, she is really only loving herself. Or consider a family, in which the father, mother, and children each exist in their own self-contained worlds. They want nothing to do with each other; they eat separately, play separately, and don’t communicate at all. The family members are separate persons, to be sure, but they lack *unity*.

Veith continues, “True love...affirms the ‘otherness’ of the beloved. And, at the same time, is ‘one’ with the beloved. The two have their own identities, and they also identify with each other, so as to form a unity beyond themselves. This is love by Trinitarian standards.”<sup>5</sup> This model of love is what the Trinity teaches us, and it is not to be limited to our families. The radicalness of the doctrine of the Trinity is tied to Jesus’ command for us to love others just as he loves us. The three persons of the Trinity are in relationship with each other through the bonds of divine love. Christians are to share this same love relationship with everyone.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that we can be in peaceful, loving relationships with our neighbors if we take the time to understand the complexities of the relationships. We cannot confound individuals into one mold. Remember, there’s a diversity of folks in this world. The only unifying force that we have in this world is faith in Jesus Christ, not conformity to a particular social formula. We also cannot divide the substance of our unity. That substance is this faith. The unity of faith in Jesus Christ is the only force that keeps us together in spite of all this diversity. Understanding the history and theology of the Trinity is fine and good. It’s also okay to be completely baffled by it. The important thing that all Christians must learn from the Trinity is that the relationship between the three persons and one essence is love and it is a heresy to confound or separate the three persons and one essence. In the same way, it is a heresy to confound or separate the love God calls us to have for him and for our neighbors.

Please join me in prayer. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, open our hearts and minds to the things you reveal to us in Scripture. Thank you for our creation and your providential care for it. Thank you for the Word written and the Word made flesh. Thank you for your sustaining and guiding Advocate, the very breath of life. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, some things are mysterious to our human intellect. We ask that you silence the doubt in our minds and make room for a faith and a love that has no end. Triune God, teach us to love and live in relationship with our neighbors, modeled after the loving relationship shared between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reformation Study Bible*, “The Triunity of God,” 1204.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Burk Parsons, “A Simple Mystery” <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/simple-mystery/>

<sup>4</sup> Gene Veith, “The Trinity and Culture” <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/trinity-and-culture/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.