

Three In One

Text: John 16:5-15; 14:7-10

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

Sometimes things just don't seem to add up. Math was always one of my strongest subjects when I was in high school. I enjoyed the challenge of solving equations. As long as you follow the right steps, you will get the right answer every time. And so when my daughter brought home a math worksheet from school, I figured that I would be more than qualified to help her finish her homework. At the time, she was only in kindergarten. They were learning the most basic stuff, like learning to count. How hard could it be? At first, it was a breeze. "This is a ten frame." There was a picture of a rectangle with ten squares. What a helpful idea! The students could fill in the squares as they counted. If they were supposed to count to three, they just color three of the little squares and leave the rest blank. Simple! We worked our way through the worksheet without even breaking a sweat, until we came to a problem that was more than a little confusing. "Count to twelve using the Ten Frame." What do you mean count to twelve? There are only ten blocks. If you want me to count to twelve, I'm going to need to draw another frame. What kind of math is this? None of the examples, at the top of the page, looked like this problem. Those were easy, but this was a challenge. I ended up drawing two more blocks onto the ten frame to make it a twelve frame and we filled in all of the squares. My daughter told me, "That's not how we did it in class, daddy." "Well then they must have done it wrong!" I informed her. Of course, when we got the homework back the next day, she was right. That wasn't how we were supposed to do it. Red ink from the teacher's pen corrected our work, showing us that we were supposed to fill in all the squares on the ten frame plus draw two dots on the outside of the frame. I guess that makes sense, if you want to do it that way. We could have at least gotten extra credit for creativity. I've come to realize that I don't understand this new math as well as I understood the old math!

We're going to test your math skills this morning to see how well you do. According to the rules of mathematics, tell me if the equation is true or false...

$1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ (How many think that is correct? You're right, according to the rules of mathematics, this would be the correct answer.)

$1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ (What will your math teacher think about this answer? Is it true or false, according to the rules of mathematics?)

This last one doesn't seem to add up, at least not if you're sitting in the classroom at school. But when we're talking about theology and the nature of God, then it is a very different story altogether. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit together are one God. We call this the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is one of the most foundational truths of the Christian faith. It is important because it affects our understanding of God, and how he relates to us. I have to admit, it's not an easy concept for us to understand. How can God be three in one? From a human standpoint, it doesn't make sense. But then again, we shouldn't expect that it would be easy for finite creatures to comprehend the infinite God. If I could explain the Almighty,

Everlasting, Creator of heaven and earth in a way that made perfect sense to you, then he wouldn't be God.

The disciples of Jesus were having a hard time understanding a lot of things in our passage. John 13-17 has been called the Upper Room Discourse, because these chapters record the conversation that took place in the upper room, where the twelve had gathered with Jesus to celebrate the Passover Meal. They had finished the supper. He had already shared the bread and the cup with them, speaking of the sacrifice he would soon make. In a few moments they would leave for the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would be betrayed and arrested. But they lingered at the table for a little while, and Jesus offered encouragement to his friends. He wouldn't be with them much longer. Soon he would depart from this world. From their perspective, this seemed like the worst possible news they could hear. But Jesus assured the disciples he would not leave them alone. He was returning to his Father, and promised to send the Holy Spirit who would dwell within their hearts. The disciples believed there was something special about Jesus. It was clear that he was no ordinary man, but they didn't quite understand what all of this meant.

Like the disciples, there is much we cannot comprehend, but the Lord leads us into a deeper knowledge and relationship with him. This is a doctrine that brings us comfort, reminding us that we're never alone. We have a Heavenly Father who loves us. The Son has suffered and died to redeem us. And the Spirit dwells within our hearts empowering us to glorify God. He is everything we could ever need.

In the book, *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem writes, "We may define the doctrine of the Trinity as follows: God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."¹ We're going to unpack that definition as we work through our passage this morning.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us: God exists as three persons.

Look at verses 5-7. Jesus told his disciples,

"But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you..."

In these verses all three members of the Trinity are present. Jesus is the Son of God, who came from heaven to redeem us. He has existed from all eternity, but at a particular moment in history he came to this earth, taking on flesh and blood, to die for our sins. Now that his mission was almost complete, he told the disciples that he would soon return to his rightful place with the Father. It was the Father who sent the Son, because of his great love for us. Jesus lived in perfect obedience to his Father, throughout his earthly ministry. Over and over again he made it clear that he came not to pursue his own will, but the will of the one who sent him. The Son

glorifies the Father, and the Father glorifies the Son. But Jesus made a promise to the disciples, in these verses, that would not leave them alone. Once he returned to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit. In the OT, the Spirit came upon individuals for a period of time empowering them to accomplish some specific task. The Spirit came and went. But now in this new age he would permanently reside within God's people, placing his seal on our lives. Jesus refers to the Spirit as the Helper or Comforter, which describes his ministry to us. In the midst of our weakness and inadequacy, the Spirit comes along side of us equipping us to live for the Lord. The disciples would rely on the Spirit's power, in the days ahead, to share the good news of Jesus with others. The Holy Spirit brings conviction as the gospel is preached showing us our sin and need for God. And the Spirit points to Jesus as the one who saves.

The passage clearly describes three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father. They are bound together in a relationship that is unlike anything else in all the universe. But they have individual roles, interacting with one another and with us in different ways. All three were active in our salvation. All three minister to us in our daily lives.

One of the errors some people have made when thinking about the Trinity is called "modalism." It is a false teaching that doesn't line up with the biblical faith. Those who hold this view claim that God is not really three persons, but one person who wears different masks at different times. In the OT he revealed himself as a Father to his people. In the Gospels he became the Son. In the book of Acts, he showed himself as the Spirit. Modalism argues that these are three titles that describe God or three hats that he might wear depending on the circumstance.

It would be sort of like how we might be called by different names depending on the circumstance. At home, my children call me "daddy." That describes my relationship to them. They are my children and I take care of them. Others call me "Pastor Trent." They know me as someone who prays with them when they are in the hospital or who shares a message from God's Word on Sunday morning. There are still others who have another kind of relationship with me. My wife knows me as her husband. We stood next to each other in a church 22 years ago to be joined as husband and wife, and have walked beside each other through thick and thin ever since. I'm only one person, but I wear different hats at different times.

Modalism tries to explain the trinity using that analogy, but it doesn't work. It doesn't line up with Scripture. These aren't just different titles, or different ways of looking at God. The Bible presents a God who exists as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is all of these things all of the time.

In the gospels we find Jesus, withdrawing from the crowds to spend time in prayer in the presence of His Father. That wouldn't make any sense if Father and Son were the same person. You wouldn't pray to yourself, and neither did Jesus. He called out to His Father. There is another passage where the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove and a voice from heaven calls out, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." Again, that passage wouldn't make any sense if Father, Son, and Spirit were only titles that described the same person. In these verses, Jesus told the disciples that he was returning to the Father. In this passage Jesus

tells his disciples that he returning to the Father who sent him. How would that work without the Trinity? Jesus didn't send himself, and wasn't returning to himself.

The problem with modalism is that it denies the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, leaving us with a diminished view of God.

It is wonderful to know that we have a Father who loves us, watching over us with compassion and care. He has adopted us into his family, claiming us as his children. He hears us, when we call out to him in prayer, and ministers to our needs. We have Savior, the Son of God, who shared our humanity and walked this earth. He can identify with the struggles we face and understands our weaknesses. He suffered and died for us, to secure our salvation. It is through faith in his name that we find redemption. And we have the Spirit who empowers us to live the Christian life. He is our helper and our comforter, who came to dwell in our hearts the moment we entered a relationship with God. He guides and directs our steps, shaping us into the people God calls us to be.

There is one God, in three persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity also teaches us that each of these members is fully God.

Look at John 16:14-15. Jesus is describing the ministry the Holy would have. Jesus says, *"He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."*

That would have seemed like an incredibly presumptuous statement, if you or I had made it. "All that belongs to Father is mine." Whoa. What are you saying? All of the Father's glory? All of the His authority? All of the worship and praise that is due his name? If we were to claim these things were ours, it would be absurd. But Jesus wasn't being presumptuous, because it is true of him. All of the glory, and the honor, and the power that belong to Father also belong to the Son.

Jesus did things that only God can do. There is a passage in Mark 2 where Jesus tells a man, "your sins are forgiven." The religious leaders began grumbling amongst themselves saying, "who can forgive sins but God alone." They failed to understand that Jesus is God and so he has that authority. Jesus accepted worship. During his triumphal entry, he rode into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey while the crowds spread palm branches on the road in front of him and began singing, "Hosanna in the highest!" The Pharisees were furious. They scolded the people and told Jesus to rebuke his disciples, but he answered them, "I tell you if they become silent the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40). Jesus claimed to have power over life and death. In John 11 Jesus stood outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus. A few verses earlier he had proclaimed, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." He went on to prove it by calling Lazarus to come forth from the grave. These are things only God can do, but Jesus did them. What he told his disciples was true. "All things that the Father has are mine."

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV) tells us, *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word...”* Colossians 1 says, *“His is the image of the invisible God... For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him”* (Col. 1:15-16)

It’s not that the Father and Son are similar, or that the two bear a striking resemblance in many ways. Scripture tells us that Jesus is the exact representation of his being. What is true of the Father is true of the Son. The same can be said of the Holy Spirit. As one author puts it, the members of the trinity “...are co-equal and co-eternal, each partaking of the divine essence.”ⁱⁱ

There might be a family resemblance among members of your family. Someone might tell you, “Your son is growing into such a young man, and he looks just like you. I bumped into him the other day and could have sworn it was you. He is tall like you and has the same eyes, and the same smile. You might be proud.” Scripture tells us there more than a striking resemblance between God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. Each person of the trinity is fully God. That means they each possess the same divine attributes. God the Father is eternal. God the Son is eternal. And God the Spirit is eternal. The Father is holy. The Son is holy. And the Spirit is holy. The Father is almighty. The Son is almighty. And the Spirit is almighty. The Father is loving. The Son is loving. And the Spirit is loving. The Father is perfect. The Son is perfect. And the Spirit is perfect.

One of errors people have made in trying to explain the Trinity is called subordinationism. Those who have held to this view say that the Father alone is supreme. While the Son is still very impressive compared to mortal men, he is inferior to the Father. And the Holy Spirit, in turn, is inferior to the Son. There is a declining level of deity. All three are God, but the Father is absolute, the Son is lesser in some ways, and the Spirit is lesser still. But that’s not at all the picture we are shown in the Bible. In every way, Jesus is fully God.

That’s what makes the ministry of Jesus so amazing. Even though he existed eternally in the form of God he did not cling to his rightful place in glory, but willingly humbled himself, taking the role of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. But through his death and resurrection he was exalted by his Father and given the name which is above all names. He is worthy of our worship and obedience.

The doctrine of the trinity also teaches us that there is one God.

Turn to John 14:7-10.

⁷ *“If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.”* ⁸ *Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”* ⁹ *Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”* ¹⁰ *“Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in*

Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works.

The disciples were confused. They had spent a lot of time with Jesus and he had taught them a great deal about the Father. He showed them how to pray to the Father, and told them about the Father's care and provision. He told them what it means to become a child of God. But they weren't sure what he meant when he told them they had seen the Father. Isn't he the invisible God, hidden from our eyes? How had they seen him? This was something Philip longed to experience. He may have been thinking about the men and women of the OT who encountered God in a dramatic way. The angel of the Lord visited Abraham and Sarah. Moses had witnessed the glory of God in the burning bush. Solomon stood at the entrance of the temple when a brilliant cloud entered the temple. Isaiah was transported to heaven, in a dream, and stood before God's throne. Elijah encountered the Lord on the mountain and heard him speak in a still small voice. Philip was hoping they might have a similar experience. "Show us the Father."

In one sense this was a noble desire. Philip wanted to know God in a deeper and more intimate way. But at the same time Jesus was sad to hear his request, because it meant the disciples had failed to grasp something important. They didn't need some kind of mystical experience to see the Father. They had already seen a vivid and clear picture of Him in Jesus. He told them "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If you have known me you know him as well."

They may not have realized it at the time, but when they spent time with Jesus, they were spending time in the presence of God. When they listened to the words of Jesus, they were hearing the voice of God. When they felt the love and compassion of Jesus, they were experiencing the love and compassion of God. This is true because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one.

Philip's request reminds me of how often we fail to see things that are right in front of us. A man asks his wife, "Have you seen my car keys? I've been looking all over for them and they are nowhere to be found." She tells him, "Yes, I've seen them. You're holding them in your hand." Or I might be searching the refrigerator for ketchup. I know there is a bottle in there somewhere. It's in a bright red container and shouldn't be so difficult to find. "Charity," I ask, "do you know where the ketchup is?" And he tells me, "It on the top shelf, right in front of your face." Philip missed what was right in front of him. He had spent so much time in the presence of Jesus, but failed to recognize him for who he truly is. To see Jesus is to see the Father.

Jesus made this point earlier, in John 10:30 when he declared "I and the Father are one." The people were offended by this statement, and some even picked up rocks to stone him, because they held the very deep conviction that there is only one God. Unlike the other nations, who worshipped many gods and goddesses, the Jewish people understood that there is only one true God. To suggest there was some other deity was the worst form of blasphemy. But Jesus wasn't suggesting that there is another. He was telling them that he is one and the same.

One of the most sacred passages of Scripture for the Jewish people was Deuteronomy 6:4. They recited these words in their daily prayers. It was the foundation of their faith. "*Hear, O*

Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” This is a definitive statement. It doesn’t leave any room for the worship of many gods or goddesses. There is only one true God, and we are to love him with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might. Jesus quoted these verses in his own ministry. He wasn’t about to contradict them. He knew that these words were true. What the people failed to understand is that he wasn’t setting himself up as some rival god, he was declaring himself to be the one true God.

Sometimes people of other religions misunderstand what we are saying when we talk about the Trinity. When we worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, they assume we believe there are three separate gods. But that is not at all what the Christian faith teaches. There are not three gods, but one God. Though we can’t explain it, and though we can’t wrap our minds around it, we know that it is true. It is something we take by faith. **Isaiah 46:9** (NASB) says, *“Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.”*

No Comparison

People have used many different analogies to help explain the Trinity, but there really isn’t any picture we could come up with that would help us understand how God can be three in one. Some have pointed to a three-leaf clover. It is made up of three separate parts but remains one clover. The problem with that analogy is that each leaf makes up only a part of the clover, one third of the whole. But Jesus isn’t one third of God, he is fully God, and so is the Father, and the and the Spirit. And so that analogy doesn’t really work. There is really nothing in the universe that we could compare with God. He is unique, incomprehensible, beyond our ability to grasp. But that shouldn’t bother us. If we could present a neat diagram of God’s nature, explaining every facet of his being, that should bother us. He is infinite but we are finite creatures and there are things about him that we will never completely understand.

This is not just an abstract, theological idea. There are practical lessons we can learn from the Trinity. It teaches us about the unity we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In John 17:11 (NIV) Jesus prayed, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world... protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.” There is no competition among the members of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit do not strive to outshine one another. There each fulfill different roles but yet share a common purpose, and a mutual love that promotes the other. That is the kinds of attitude that the Lord is producing in us, one that is unselfish, humble, seeking the good of others, working together for a common purpose, to share the message of salvation in the world and to bring glory to God.

And so let us worship the Triune God: drawing near our Heavenly Father and experiencing his love through Jesus the Son, serving him in this world through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Grudem, Wayne p.226

ⁱⁱ Packer, J. I. (1993). *Concise theology: a guide to historic Christian beliefs* (pp. 40–42). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.