

The Trinity: I believe in One God Father Son and Holy Spirit

Introduction

Does it matter what we believe about God? Is it important to address God accurately? I hope the answer all of us would give is yes! After all at the human level, getting the names right of other people is important, especially if they have a significant place in our lives. If you as a married person repeatedly called your spouse 'Jane' when her name was 'Mary' or 'Fred' when his name was 'Mike', there might be some offence taken –with good reason! Using appropriate words in our communications is very important. Imagine you are attending a community event with a work colleague and you come across some close friends and introduce that person to them as your 'partner'. Now you might be a teacher and your colleague your stage-partner in the school, but referring to them in an introduction to friends as a 'partner' would convey the wrong message in twenty-first century Britain! Using correct names and conveying an accurate impression of our relationships with others is very important. Our society at the moment is also struggling to know how to handle the heated debate over claims of misgendering with particular reference to the Transgender community. When we get it wrong or we don't know how to describe or address someone, it can be quite stressful because it matter to us (or should do) to get it right.

Who we are and our relationships with one another are important, but symbols are also important. For example, a married person who stops wearing their wedding ring and declares to all who will listen that they have discarded it is making a bigger statement than a choice of jewellery! It is very sad, but is a powerful indicator about their damaged or even broken relationship with the person they had married. It is even more important that we understand who God is and how we relate to the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of humankind.

What is God like? He is different in kind to us, a being that is beyond our understanding yet in His love He has chosen to reveal to us something of what He is like. The Bible's presentation of God, in contrast to the representations of the gods of some other religions, is as the living God (Psalm 115:3-8). He is a personal God who desires fellowship with His creatures and was incarnated in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). He is a spiritual being (John 4:23-24) who desires us to worship Him in spirit and truth. Yet it is something we struggle to understand because God is so much greater than us. However the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not an explanation of God; it is a description of what we know about Him. Our subject today is as central to the Christian faith as the backbone is to the skeleton in the human body. What does the Bible say about it and what difference does it make to our daily lives and our collective witness as a church?

1. Old Testament pointers to the Trinity

There are quite a lot of things in life that are not straightforward. We have clues or indications of the choices we might make, but we are conscious that we don't always have all the information required to make an informed decision. Whether it is a police officer seeking to solve a crime or a scientist engaged in practical research to provide a vaccine for the Covid-19 virus all kinds of options will be explored to get a better understanding of the

subject under investigation. When we come to the Bible to find out what it is teaching on this subject we must look in quite a number of different passages to get the bigger picture.

‘We believe in **One** God, in **three** persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit’

This statement is the historic Christian declaration of our understanding of God.

In contrast to the polytheism (many gods) of Hinduism, for example, we believe in only One God (Monotheism). Deuteronomy 6:4 states: *Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.* Idolatry, that is worshipping other gods, was forbidden in the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Deuteronomy 5:7 is very clear: *You shall have no other gods besides Me.* This fundamental belief in the oneness and unity in the Godhead we share with Jews and Muslims. Even in the O.T., however, there are pointers that suggest a Trinitarian understanding of God; for example, the name of God ‘Elohim’ in Genesis is plural in form, even if the significance of it is not made explicit until the New Testament. Interestingly enough, the word ‘Allah’ in the Qur’an is also plural in form.

What are the clues we need to locate in the Old Testament?

(a) God is more than one person

There are three statements by God in Genesis 1-11 that indicate the plurality of beings within the One true God. They are in Gen.1:26 *Let us make man in **our** image* in the Creation account in Genesis 1. Then after the act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden, God declared in Gen.3:22 *the man has now become like one of **us**.* The third reference comes many years later when some people rebelled against God and built the Tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:7 records God as stating: *let **us** go down and confuse their language.*

Another passage where the same phenomenon occurs is: Isaiah 6:8 *Who will go for **us**?* In this last passage, Isaiah 6:1 states what Isaiah the prophet saw in the vision he had in the Temple in Jerusalem: *In the year that King Uzziah died, **I saw the Lord**, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.* In effect saying that he saw God on the throne in this vision; but who did Isaiah actually see? John gives the answer in John’s Gospel chapter 12 vs 37-41, specifying that it was Jesus. *Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in Him.*³⁸ *This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’*³⁹ *For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:*⁴⁰ *‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them.’*⁴¹ *Isaiah said this **because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about Him.*** This is powerful confirmation of the Old Testament testimony to the deity of Jesus.

(b) The Angel of the Lord is identified with God yet is distinct from Him

Exodus 3:2-6, 13-14 - encounter of Moses with God at the burning bush.

Is there anyone in the Bible who referred to themselves as the ‘I AM’, the eternally present one. In John 8:24 Jesus in debate with other Jewish religious leaders who contested His identity claims used this title: *... if you do not believe that **I AM** [He –God’s anointed King], you will indeed die in your sins.* No ordinary human being could make such a claim with any credibility. In John 8:28a Jesus referenced His future death by crucifixion at their hands, in

collaboration with the Roman state who had control of all executions. *So Jesus said, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM [He]...* Even more remarkably in the final section of the debate Jesus declared that Abraham, the founding father of the nation who had lived thousands of years earlier, had been delighted as he reflected with anticipation on what the future anointed King would accomplish. The majority of those present rejected this claim outright as impossible. How did Jesus respond? *'Very truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I AM!'* Here in John 8 we find Jesus referring to Himself as *'I AM'*, the very name God uses for His self-designation in Exodus 3:13-14: *Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is His name?" Then what shall I tell them?'*¹⁴ *God said to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. [or I AM the eternally present One] This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."* It is, therefore probable that it was Jesus whom Moses met.

The second example comes from Judges 13. This chapter is about an encounter of Manoah and his wife with the Angel of the Lord. Judges 13:9 states: *And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of the Lord came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field.* When the whole matter was concluded, Manoah reflected on what had happened and in Judges 13:22 came to this conclusion: *We are doomed to die!, he said to his wife. We have seen God!* Another piece of the puzzle to remember here comes from the New Testament. We need to remember the words of I Timothy 6:15-16 with reference to God the Father that describes Him as one *'whom no man has seen or can see'*, ie invisible. The *Angel of the Lord* here, and in the other references to this person in the O.T., must be referring to Jesus as evangelical commentators have agreed over the centuries.

(c) The Spirit of God is identified as the personal representative of God

The first reference refers to the Holy Spirit's involvement in the creation of the world. Genesis 1:2: *'The Spirit of God moved across the face of the waters'*. The next two speak of the part played by the Holy Spirit in helping the Israelites in their desert journeys from Egypt to Israel. Nehemiah 9:20 states: [in the Wilderness wanderings] *You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them.* And Isaiah 63:9-10 records a reference to: *the Angel of His presence [who] saved them* but in response the Israelites in the desert *'rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.'* In the remarkable Psalm 139:7 we have these concluding remarks on the significance of the work of the Holy Spirit. *Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or, Where can I flee from Your Presence?*

(d) The creative power of the Word of God is declared (Psalm 33:6, 9; Genesis 1)

Here the writer of this Psalm echoes the words of Genesis chapter one in declaring that God spoke and brought the world into being.

Psalm 33:6: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth.*

Genesis 1:3: *And God said, Let there be light...*

(e) There is an identification of the Messiah with God

The term Messiah means God's anointed or special King or ruler. In the cultural and religious context in which this Psalm was written, it had been assumed that the Messiah would simply be a very special but exclusively human person. However, this Psalm indicated

that these expectations needed to be changed. Psalm 2:2: *...the Lord and His anointed...* and Psalm 2:7: *The Lord has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have become Your Father.* This is especially true in the job description in Psalm 2:8: *Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.* Which King has subjects who swear allegiance to Him around the globe? This is straightforward King Jesus has people committed to follow Him in every land across the globe

This point is reinforced in the Messianic Psalm 110. The first verse pictures God the Father and the one who is His anointed King on the same level in heaven. Psalm 110:1 *'The Lord said to My Lord, sit at my right hand.'* We also remember these familiar verses from Isaiah that we read every Advent and Christmas time from Isaiah 9:6 where the Messiah is called: *Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* It is impossible that these words are describing an ordinary human being.

2. New Testament evidence of the Deity of Jesus

There are many verses and passages that could be cited here in support of this biblical truth. In Hebrews 1:3 the author states this concerning Jesus and His relationship with God the Father: *He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.* Jesus teaches the same thing when He said, *Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father* (John 14:9), and the apostle Paul says: *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form* (Colossians 2:9). The writer of Hebrews reinforces this when he quotes Psalm 45:6 and recorded that God the Father was saying: *But about the Son He says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;* It cannot get clearer than that. Probably some of the best known verses in the New Testament that refer to the deity of Jesus are from John's Gospel. John reminds us that unlike ordinary human beings like us, Jesus existed from eternity with the Father before He was born as a baby in Bethlehem. John writes in John 1:1-2: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning.* There was never a time when the Second person of the Trinity was not divine. After the resurrection of Jesus from the dead His followers grasped His true identity. In John 20:28, the formerly sceptical Thomas declared: *My Lord and My God.* Jesus received this worship because it was rightly offered. Paul and Barnabas, Early Church leaders declined similar worship when it was offered in Acts 14 at a place called Lystra, because as Paul declared in Acts 14:15: *We too are only men, human like you.* Jesus reminded His first followers of the importance of getting this right in our worship of God the Father and Him. In John 5:23 He stated: *... that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent Him.* Do you give Jesus the honour and worship He deserves to receive from you and from me?

3. New Testament evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit

Some people and some religions, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses, see the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force, but this is not the biblical understanding. The Holy Spirit is a person, and speaking of Him rightly must take that into account. Verses such as Mark 3:28-29 are inexplicable if the reader is unaware that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Holy

Trinity. Mark 3:28-29 states: *he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation.* What is this sin that has the most serious penalty of all in the Bible? We need to grasp what the Holy Spirit was sent by Jesus to do here in the lives of people on earth. John 15:26 records Jesus telling His first disciples that He will send the Holy Spirit in His place to assist them in their future work of founding the Christian Church. *When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – He will testify about Me.*). In John 16:8-10 Jesus outlined the work of the Holy Spirit: *When He comes, He will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because people do not believe in Me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see Me no longer; ¹¹and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.* The Holy Spirit's work is to show human beings that we are sinners who need a Saviour, the Lord Jesus who died in our place on the cross, two thousand years ago. He speaks to our minds and consciences and directs us to Jesus. If we wilfully reject His promptings then after this life God will eternally honour the choice that we have made. He will never force anyone to believe in Him or spend eternity with Him.

The significance of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the first Christian Church in Jerusalem is seen in Acts chapter 5. A couple in the church called Ananias and Sapphira, at the time of what we might call a time of fund-raising to meet the basic needs of people living in Jerusalem, lied about the price of the field they sold. Why was that important? They claimed they were giving all the proceeds to the appeal and wanted the praise for that. But it was not true. The Apostle Peter was delegated to challenge them about what they had done. In Acts 5:3-4 Peter told the husband Ananias: *Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit ... What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.* A lesson in accountability was learned from the very start of the Christian Church.

Christians in our prayer times, both individually and collectively ask God the Holy Spirit to prompt and guide us in our daily lives. One of the most remarkable outcomes of a prayer time in the church at Antioch in Syria was the calling of Saul and Barnabas to be missionaries around the Roman world sharing the good news of the Christian Gospel. In Acts 13:2: *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* He enables us to honour Jesus in the choices we make in our lives. He gives us a freedom, an ability to make the right choices when we seek His assistance in our daily lives. The apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 3:17: *'Now the Lord is the Spirit: And where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.'* The word translated 'Lord' is understood as a term of address for one who is truly God in the Bible. He also pointed out some personal implications of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives in I Corinthians 6:19-20, where he wrote: *'your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God'.* How we care for our bodies and how we use them is something He is deeply interested in. The relevance of a sensible diet and appropriate exercise and getting enough sleep are part of that self-care He desires for us. But it also informs our relationships and sexuality. If our body is the temple of the **Holy** Spirit then causal or inappropriate sexual relationships are out of bounds. It is not just my choice or my call, God the Holy Spirit has an investment in my life for my good.

4. Practical Importance of this Doctrine

Does it really matter whether we believe in the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead, of the One that we worship ? Yes it does profoundly. Some basic matters depend on it.

Our salvation If Jesus died on the cross as merely a human being His perfect sacrifice would have been good for Him but insufficient for the rest of humanity. As one who was truly God and truly man, He reconciled God to us and us to God through His sacrifice of infinite worth. He did it in fulfilling the plan of God the Father (John 3:16 *God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son...*); a task He willingly accepted (Matthew 26:39); and through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:14: *... who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God...*). His sacrifice specifically for His Church, that great multitude of people who by faith would receive the benefits of His death in our place, but it is sufficient for everyone who wants to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Remember in Mark 2 the story of the paralysed man brought by his four friends for Jesus to heal him. In Mark 2:5 it states: *When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralysed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven. Our salvation is secure because of who Jesus truly is.*

Our prayers Prayer is hard for most Christians but it is God's gift to His Church to influence the plans of heaven for people on earth. Remember what Jesus is doing in heaven. Hebrews 7:25 states: *Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* The good news gets even better. We can always come directly to God the Father in prayer. The line is never engaged! Paul writes in Ephesians 2:18: *For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit is directly involved too. He strengthens and enables us to live for Jesus each day. It is because He is God, not merely a messenger of God that He has unique insight into the will of God (I Corinthians 2:11) and can help us in our prayers, especially when we do not know how to pray (Romans 8:26-27, because He does it: *in accordance with the will of God*, encouraging and strengthening us in our faith.

The Bible's teaching on this doctrine is so important as it is central to our faith. No wonder, we conclude most services saying this Trinitarian prayer: *'Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all* (II Corinthians 13:14) Amen

Question for reflection:

The unity between the three persons in the Trinity as well as their distinct personalities is a model of perfect fellowship. How can we as Christians better reflect that unity as well as acknowledging our diversity in each local church?

Song for reflection: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzM9P_Gqw-s

