

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 15

The Trinity – Part One

Last fall, I found myself having lunch with a Justice from the United States Supreme Court. The atmosphere was informal, and the conversation was far from anything law related. We were discussing *Lonesome Dove* and which was better, the movie or the book.

When my turn came to give my opinion, I suggested that I liked the book better. The Justice asked me which I had done first, seen the movie or read the book. I explained that I first saw the movie, and it was wonderful. Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall made characters that mesmerized me. I needed more! So then I read the book, giving me their characters all over again with even more to enjoy. I went on that after I had read the book, I read the prequel, and then the sequel.

Before the word “sequel” was fully out of my mouth, the Justice interrupted. “You read what?” he said. I repeated I read the prequel and he scolded me saying, “Prequel is not a word!” Not one to back down on such things, I smiled and politely yet bluntly said, “Yes, it is.” He asked, “What does it mean?” and I told him that in a series, it refers to the one before the one that you are discussing.

The Justice dismissively waived his hand and said, “There is no such word.” I replied, “Well, it is in the dictionary.” His next comment was, “Well, maybe *Webster’s Third*, but that is not a real dictionary. They put everything in there. Webster’s last real dictionary was the second edition.”

Not one to give up easily, I asked him, “Do you consider *Oxford’s English Dictionary* a real one?” His answer was, “Yes, of course, but you will not find ‘prequel’ in there!”

Having a laptop handy, and knowing how to “Google” such things, I immediately (and privately) looked the word up. Yes, it was in *Oxford’s English Dictionary*! Of course before dinner, the Justice brought it up again, giving me the chance to confirm my position, “prequel” was indeed in Oxford’s. The Justice still wanted to see it with his own eyes!

Ultimately, the Justice had to agree that the word was in fact in Oxford’s. Still, as he told me as recently as last week, he did not believe it belonged there! He said, “Mark, I really thought you had made that word up!”

While I never made up the word, had I done so, I would have been in some grand company of lawyers who have made up words. One of the first lawyers I know who made up some good words was a fellow from Northern Africa named

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Tertullian. Tertullian was born a pagan around 160 and converted to Christianity by 197. Aside from his legal career, Tertullian wrote a lot of theology, in both Greek and Latin. His Latin works are what concern us now.¹

By all accounts, Tertullian, while writing his theology in Latin, invented the word, “Trinity.” Tertullian used it to refer to God in a fullness of three persons, making it up from the Latin *trini* meaning “three.”² It is the Trinity that we study today.

THE TRINITY

As we consider the Trinity, and specifically Paul’s theology on the subject, we need to start with two basic considerations:

1. The word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible. As noted above, we believe it was first used by Tertullian, and so we find it nowhere in scripture.
2. The reasons for believing in and understanding the Trinity are rooted squarely in the scriptures. The affirmation of this orthodoxy is an effort to put into a coherent form what scripture teaches about God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As we unfold some of the riches of this understanding, we utilize the following plan: (1) Set out the problem; (2) Consider what scripture teaches on the subject; and (3) Focus more deliberately on Paul’s contributions to understanding the Trinity. Next week, we will consider Paul’s teachings on the Trinity in light of the Church’s historical understanding.

THE PROBLEM

What exactly do we mean when we say “Trinity”? The Catholic Encyclopedia defines the Trinity as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the one God in three Persons that is the object of the Christian confession.”³ There are more elaborate definitions that have developed through the history of the church we will consider

¹ Our lesson on Tertullian from our Church History series can be downloaded from our website at www.Biblical-Literacy.com

² Tertullian, De Pudicitia, Chapter 21:16 (“*in quo est trinitas unius diuinitatis, Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus.*”). Before Tertullian gave us the Latin “Trinity,” Greek writers (Theophilus and Justin Martyr) had used a Greek word *Trias* to a similar effect.

³ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2d Edition (Thomson Gale 2003, v. 14 at 189).

next week. Yet for this week, the above definition suffices. It is akin to the clarification that God is one in “substance,” but three in “persons.”⁴

Where do the problems lie in understanding this doctrine? First, we recognize that a fundamental premise of both Judaism and Christianity is the divine revelation contained in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Add to this the certainty of the first of the Ten Commandments that warns, “You shall have no other Gods before me” (Dt. 5:7). So we understand that there is but one God, yet we have the affirmation in scripture that the Father is God, Jesus is God, and so is the Holy Spirit. Does this mean there is one God or three? How are we to follow this in a consistent manner?

At the outset of probing this problem, I need to set out two more considerations:

1. Make a fist and look at it. The size of your fist is roughly the size of your brain. That is the amount of grey cells that are firing neurons as you read this lesson and as you contemplate the Trinity. Let us be blunt: our grey cells massed together in a clump the size of our fist are attempting to understand the depths of being, the make up, of the omnipotent Creator God who fashioned universes, keeps track of every hair on the head of every person, knows past, present, and future more surely than we can say the ABC’s. Let us not be so arrogant as to think there will not be some measure of mystery to us in studying this.
2. We have a strong tendency as humans to anthropomorphize God.⁵ It is hard for us to think of him in any terms other than our own. Our terms are, naturally, shaped by our experiences. This leaves us trying to understand God in human experienced terms, and yet God is not human! To some degree, we are putting a square peg into a round hole, yet what we are really doing is so much more than that!

The reason we set out these considerations in this section on the problem is because of some questions that merit our attention. First, we ask what makes a person? If God is “three persons,” then what do we mean by that phrase? We can go back to our lawyer turned wordsmith Tertullian for part of the answer. It was Tertullian who took the Latin *persona* (“person”) and applied it to God.

⁴ The Athanasian Creed expressed the Trinity as thus: “We worship one God in the Trinity, and the Trinity in unity; we distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance...The entire three persons are coeternal and coequal with one another, so that...we worship complete unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity.” See our lesson on Athanasius, number 22 in Church History at www.Biblical-Literacy.com

⁵ See lesson 38 on Paul’s Life and Teaching for more on anthropomorphizing God at <http://www.biblical-literacy.com>.

We might be surprised to learn of the word's usage before Tertullian snatched it for deep theological thought. *Persona* was Latin for the mask worn by actors in a dramatic play. The reference extended to the roles the actor would play, for the mask indicated the role the actor performed. To some extent, we use the word that way today when we speak of the "persona" someone shows.

Tertullian used the word, and although scholars are not fully sure why, it seems a fair assumption reading him that, "Tertullian wanted his readers to understand the idea of 'one substance, three persons' to mean that the one God played three distinct yet related roles in the great drama of human redemption."⁶

Over time, as we will see next week, the church has modified and further drawn lines around what orthodoxy considers the meaning of three persons. But we should pause now and return to a very 21st century question: What makes a person a person? Is it arms, legs, *etc.*? Surely not, for one could be missing his arms and legs and yet that one is still a person. Is it unique DNA? Does that mean that if we found science able to create a perfect clone, then there would not be a new person? Is a "person" one who occupies the brain neurons in a grouping of matter? If so, once the brain ceases to fire, once one is dead (or brain dead), does the person cease to exist? Do we believe there is no after-life for a person?

As we consider these questions, something rises up in some of us shouting, "Me! I am a person! My essence, what makes me me, what makes me different than anyone else, that is what a person is!" But that really does not answer the question fully! Why are you, why am I, a "person?"

We point out these questions as we attempt to understand the orthodoxy of God as three "persons" all while recognizing that we should not anthropomorphize God and claim that we understand his essence. For he is not made in our image, we were made in his.

Before we quit discussing the problems of meaning, we should add that we will have to address what it means to be "one" person as opposed to three. Consider, for example, what Matthew wrote that Jesus taught from the Old Testament that,

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (19:5).

What did Jesus mean that the two become "one." Paul quotes the same passage and then adds that there is a profound mystery here as the passage "refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:21-32).

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction* (Blackwell Publishers 1994) at 250.

One last issue before we leave the “problem” area. One might why study the Trinity at all? Is this the ultimate lawyer abuse? Did a bunch of lawyers and theologians sit around and try to dream up complicated problems that are not really in scripture? The answer to this is set out well by Roger Olson,

Much of the story recounted here will consist of explaining the tensions, conflicts and controversies that lay in the backgrounds of such seemingly speculative ideas as the triunity of God (the Trinity)... Why were these seemingly technical but absolutely crucial Christian doctrines developed? Certainly not because the bishops and the other leaders of early Christendom had nothing better to do. The reason is simply that ideas about God and Jesus Christ that undermined the gospel were quickly arising and gaining popularity, and if widely accepted, they would lead to a “different gospel” and a different religion than that taught by the apostles and handed down through the early centuries of the church. In almost every case doctrines were proposed and developed because someone perceived the gospel to be at stake.⁷

So, we have our work cut out for us. We need to better understand the truths of scripture as God has revealed himself, all the while remembering our finiteness and the eternity of the infinite, transcendent God. Moreover, we need to remember that anthropomorphizing God may help us grasp some of his infiniteness, yet it is not in itself, an absolute picture!

SCRIPTURE

If the Bible does not speak of the “Trinity” per se, then what does the Bible say relevant to the subject? According to the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921):

The seeds that developed into the full flower of New Testament trinitarian revelation are already planted in the Old Testament...The true development of the trinitarian ideas of the Old Testament is found in the New Testament. In the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the one true God is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁸

James Montgomery Boice makes the same point, but adds a good warning:

⁷ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (IVP 1999) at 15-16.

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 2: God and Creation* (Baker Academic 2004) at 256.

The word *Trinity* is not in the Bible...What we know about the Trinity we know only because of God's revelation of it in the Bible, and even then we don't know it well. In fact, so prone are we to make mistakes in dealing with this subject that we must be especially careful lest we go beyond or misrepresent what we find in scripture.⁹

We now look to scripture for the revelations that reveal God in what we term a "Trinity."

Old Testament

The Old Testament bears witness to the unity of God. We have set out earlier the Deuteronomy passages that are blunt about God as the one God. However, we find hints of a plurality of God as we look through passages in the Old Testament.

God uses the plural pronouns in a number of Old Testament passages:

- "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).
- "Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22).
- "Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7).
- "And I heard the voice of the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Is. 6:8)

There are a number of other passages that hint at a Trinity including passages that seem to distinguish the Lord from the Lord in some sense:

- "Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven" (Gen 19:24).
- "But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen" (Hos. 1:7).
- "And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zech. 3:2).

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (IVP 1986) at 109-110.

This is not dissimilar to what Paul did in 2 Timothy 1:18, “may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day! —and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.”

We also find passages in the Old Testament where the coming Son is held distinct from God:

- “Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there.” And now the LORD God has sent me, and his Spirit” (Is. 48:16).
- “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you” (Ps. 2:7).
- “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Is. 9:6).
- “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrata, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic. 5:2).

Similarly, the Spirit is set out distinct from the LORD in the Old Testament:

- “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1-2).
- “Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (Gen. 6:3).
- “So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him” (Num. 28:18).
- “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11).

Some scholars take a foreshadowing of “three persons” in the Trinity from the three fold “holy” given in Isaiah 6: 3 (“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”). Some scholars also see the Trinity in the threefold blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 (“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”).

All of these Old Testament passages are certainly open to other interpretations and by no means definitive in their teaching on the Trinity; however, many scholars see the clear suggestion of the Trinity even before the incarnation.¹⁰

New Testament

The scriptures that teach the Trinity orthodoxy are found mainly in the New Testament. It is there we find the passages that show the three persons of the Trinity as distinct, yet working together:

- “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him” (Mt. 3:16).
- “And I [Jesus] will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever” (Jn. 14:16)
- “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” (Mt. 28:19)
- “According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet. 1:2).
- “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18).

Repeatedly, the New Testament recognizes the Father as God:

- “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” (Jn. 6:27).
- “Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.'” (Jn 8:54).
- “Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'” (Jn 20:17).
- “According to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2).

¹⁰ See Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans 1979) at 90-91; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans 1938) at 85-86.

- “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (2 Pet. 1:17).
- “To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:1).
- “And made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 1:6).

The Son, Jesus, is certainly recognized as deity throughout the New Testament. The basic attributes of God are found in the Son (eternity, omnipresence, omniscience,¹¹ omnipotence, and immutability): While the passages are too numerous for this lesson, consider the following:

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1, 14).
- “But of the Son he says, 'your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom” (Heb. 1:8).
- “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).
- “But of the Son he says,...You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end" (Heb. 1:8, 10-12).
- “Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn. 20:28).

The Holy Spirit is also set out as God in the New Testament. Before setting a selection of those passages out, we should note that the New Testament does not speak of the Spirit as simply some power or force. He is spoken of as a person. Jesus uses the masculine personal pronoun “he” in reference to the Spirit in John 14:26, 16:13, *etc.* The same term “Helper” or “Comforter” that is used of Christ (Jn 14:16; 1 Jn 2:1) is used of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). We also remember all the actions of the Holy Spirit as set out in the last few lessons (convicting the world of sin, *etc.*)

¹¹ There are certainly indications that this attribute was set aside for a time in the incarnation as we see, for example, in Mark 13:32, “But concerning that day [of the second coming] or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Noting then a few of the many passages that show the Holy Spirit to be a person or being, we now look at a few that indicate the Spirit is God:

- “And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).
- “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14).
- “But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?... You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5:3-4).

PAUL’S WRITINGS

Not surprisingly, Paul is fully consistent with the New Testament passages recited above on all points.

Paul puts the three persons working together in multiple passages:

- “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4-6). This passage is especially powerful when read in the Greek. Paul has structured the passage into three equal parts, one referencing the Spirit, one referencing the Lord Jesus and one referencing God the Father. The even distribution shows Paul thinking of the three as equals working together as one.
- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his

glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:3-14). This passage is long, but it encapsulates what we have been setting out in this lesson. Paul writes of God the Father blessing the church in Christ with the blessings that include the sealing of the Holy Spirit, the guarantee.

- “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). In this simple benediction, Paul again casts the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three equal parts working together as one.

We also read from Paul that each is God. Paul writes of the Father as God:

- “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7).
- “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Gal. 1:1).

Paul writes of Jesus as God, calling him “Lord,” the Septuagint equivalent of Yahweh (LORD) in the Old Testament. This was the major point of our earlier theology lesson number 8. Consider on this point Romans 10:9-13. Paul wrote:

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

After calling for a confession that Jesus is Lord, Paul quotes Joel 2:32 that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Joel is using Yahweh in that passage (our English Bibles would translate the Joel passage as “LORD”) Paul is clearly equating Jesus with the Lord of the Old Testament. This is the Lord (LORD) that spoke to Moses from a burning bush in Exodus 3. This is the LORD that led Israel out of Egypt! This, for Paul, is Christ!

Paul also writes of the Holy Spirit as fully God with God’s powers and attributes. Paul expressly calls the Spirit the Lord in 2 Cor. 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”). We have already set out passages where Paul treats the Spirit in the same manner that he does the Father and Son.

Where does this leave us? Really just starting! We now have some building

blocks to elaborate on the Trinity, on how God can be three and yet be one. Next week, we will explore this concept by looking at questions the church has formed over the centuries about this and how the church has resolved those questions by relying on Paul, as well as the rest of scripture.

CONCLUSION

How are the “Three” “One?” How can we put our arms around this question? If these questions are bothering you, then you must come back next week. With all due respect to the Supreme Court Justice, this lesson is merely the *prequel* to our answers!¹²

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one*” (Dt. 6:4).

This is the core of faith. There are not multiple Gods to please. There are not multiple Gods to appease. We do not need to make our peace with multiple Gods. There is no basis for pitting one God against another. There is one God from whom we are alienated by our sin. This one God has paid the one price that satisfies the one God’s justice, the sacrifice of Christ. That sacrifice is sufficient for all sin before the one God. The one God indwells the believer through the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of the eternal satisfaction wrought by the work of God in Christ.

2. “*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*” (Mat. 28:19).

Christ tells us our baptism is in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of the three in one plays a role in the redemption of the believer. The Father sent the Son out of love for us (“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” Jn 3:16). Jesus so loved the world that he came (“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” Jn 15:13). This same love now lives in us through the Holy Spirit (“hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This is the love that now changes the way we live! (“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” Jn 14:15).

¹² Thanks on this point to reader/advisor Ken Dye.

3. *“Let us make man in our image.”* (Gen. 1:26).

God did not make man because he was lonely. God did not make man because he was bored. God did not make man because he needed man. God existed from eternity, three in one – three persons, one substance. God had love, communication, fellowship, from eternity to eternity. Let us never consider ourselves necessary for God. Nor should we ever consider him a vain being that desires the worship of many creatures. God is beyond our understanding, yet he reveals himself in ways that make some sense to us. Namely, he reveals himself in relationship terms (Father, Friend, Helper) not because he needs us, but because he loves us and chooses to give to us. Seeking to offer us a relationship with him. Should we not sell everything we have to get such a relationship? Yet, people walk away when it is offered as a gift!