

Subject: *Understanding the Trinity*
Scripture: *Matthew 3:13-17; 22:35-38*

Our scripture text comes from two different chapters in Matthew. In Matthew 3:13-17, we have a passage which is understood to be the clearest teaching of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. In Matthew 22:35-38, we have Christ's clear statement about the first and great commandment in God's law. In Matthew 3 we have the baptism of Christ in which the three persons of the Trinity are present at exactly the same time. How can the one true God exist in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)? It seems to defy logic and some would say it is a mystery that is beyond us and therefore we need not be concerned about it. Yet in Matthew 22, Christ tells us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind. One of the ways we love God is with our mind. We are to think of Him often. We are to think of Him clearly and carefully. The better we know Him, the better we will love, worship, and serve Him.

We are thinking today about the Trinity—the truth that there is one God in three persons. We will never know the full mystery of the Trinity in this life, but we should seek to understand as well as we possibly can, with God's help.

Terry Johnson, a pastor in Savannah, GA., has written an excellent book on the nature of God in which he states: "Reliable thoughts of God are to be found only in the Scriptures. The Bible is God's own textbook for the study of God." When someone writes a statement like that, it gets my attention. He goes on to say, "If we are not careful to fill our minds with correct notions about God, our minds will surely be filled with incorrect ones. Our concepts will be either right or wrong. Today's widespread ignorance of God can be traced in large part to a failure to submit ourselves to God's self-revelation in Scripture" (*The Identity and Attributes of God*, 6).

1. Is the Trinity an unexplained mystery or an important biblical truth?

There is a sense in which the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery. Some things we cannot fully explain, but we accept as true. I can't explain electricity, but I know it is real. I can't explain how a brown cow eats green grass and produces white milk, but it does.

There is an element of mystery in the Trinity, but that is not a reason to deny it or avoid it. Paul Washer writes: "Some may say that they cannot believe what they cannot understand—if something cannot be explained, it cannot be true. If we were to apply this same logic to the entire Bible or even to our own existence, then there would be very little left for us to believe. Even the simplest truths of Scripture and of human reality go beyond our understanding. Our belief in the Trinity is based not upon our imperfect understanding, but upon the true testimony of Holy Scriptures" (*Knowing the Living God*, 17).

The Trinity is a mystery in two senses. It is a mystery in the biblical sense because it was known only by God until He revealed it in Scripture. It is also a mystery in the sense that it is ultimately beyond human reason and comprehension. Tozer writes: "The Church has not hesitated to teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Without pretending to understand, she has given her witness, she has repeated what the Holy Scriptures teach" (*Knowledge of the Holy*, 26).

So the answer to our first question, "Is the Trinity an unexplained mystery or an important biblical truth?" the answer is yes, there is an element of mystery that is beyond our full comprehension, but there is the clear biblical truth that we should know as best we can.

The Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith because it gives us understanding into the very nature of God and answers the question: what is God like in himself? It is not contrary to reason and logic but can be rationally explained, supported, and understood through biblical revelation.

2. What does the Bible teach about the Trinity?

The word “Trinity” is actually not found in the Bible, but the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught. One simple definition of the Trinity is that “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet he is one God.” The word “Trinity” is a combination of the prefix “tri” meaning three and unity meaning one, so Trinity refers to one God in three persons. The word “Trinity” was first used by Tertullian, one of the early church fathers (A.D. 150-230). He didn’t invent the doctrine of the Trinity, but he was among the first to explain it in some detail.

Alister McGrath gives this helpful analogy: “The doctrine of the Trinity wasn’t invented—it was uncovered. It’s like someone drawing a map which shows all the features of the country, thus allowing you to establish how they relate to each other. Those relations are already there—the map just helps make them clearer” (*Understanding the Trinity*, 148). So what does the Bible tell us about the Trinity?

A. There is only one God

This is taught in the Old Testament and confirmed in the New Testament...a few examples...

Deuteronomy 6:4 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.*

Isaiah 45:22 *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.*

John 17:3 *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*

1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*

B. God exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Three persons were present at Christ’s baptism.

Three persons were mentioned in Christ’s promise to the disciples.

John 14:16-17 ¹⁶ *And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;* ¹⁷ *Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*

Three persons were mentioned in Christ’s commission.

Matthew 28:19 *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

Three persons were mentioned in Paul’s letters. For example, the Trinitarian benediction.

2 Corinthians 13:14 *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.*

C. Each person is fully God

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all referred to as God.

They all have the same attributes (eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, holy, unchangeable).

They all have the same divine rights and authority (to receive worship, forgive sin).

They all perform divine actions (to create and sustain life, raise the dead).

They all were involved in the creation of the universe.

They all were involved in Christ's death and resurrection.

They all were involved in man's redemption.

D. All persons are equally God, but they have different roles

The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are all fully God, but they are different in the ways they relate to each other and to creation.

The Father sends the Son; the Son obeys the Father; the Father and Son send the Spirit.

In creation the Father spoke everything into existence; the Son was the agent who carried out those words; and the Holy Spirit was actively hovering over the face of the waters.

In redemption the Father made the plan; the Son became the sacrifice for sins; and the Holy Spirit applies it to the hearts of sinners.

3. How does this truth affect our life?

A. Understanding the Trinity should captivate us

The truth about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should grip our heart, soul, and mind.

Charles Spurgeon: "Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as the devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity. The most excellent study for expanding the soul is the science of Christ and Him crucified and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity."

B. Understanding the Trinity should educate us

It should teach us that God is personal and relational. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed in a relationship of perfect glory, unity, and love.

It should teach us that God is self-sufficient. He is perfectly content within Himself. He did not create us because He was lonely or needy, but only for His own glory.

It should teach us that God's work of salvation will be accomplished. In love and wisdom the Father planned it. In obedience and submission the Son purchased it. In His perfect way and time the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to apply it. All three persons of the Trinity are committed to finish the work of redemption in us. God's work for us and in us will be done.

C. Understanding the Trinity should motivate us

It should inspire us to study Scripture to see what God has revealed about Himself and that truth will inspire us to worship Him. Our worship rises from our knowledge of God. The deeper our understanding of God, the richer our worship of Him will be. Understanding the Trinity should motivate us to be unified, even as Christ prayed in *John 17:20-24*. The unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should be reflected in the church on earth. How will the world ever know of unity in the glorious Trinity if they don't see unity in His people?