

## **TTS Essentials – Session [3]: The Trinity NOTES**

Welcome to the first session of TTS!

- Thanks for coming.
- Thanks to Freedom Church for hosting.

**Let's get the boring stuff out the way first!**

- **FIRST: Where have we come from?**
  - **CWG background:**
    - Group of friends, wanting to explore deep things.
  - **TTS background:**
    - Had its 'trial run' since June 2017.
    - Opened it up more broadly in Oct 2018.
- **SECOND: Who are we?**
  - **DISCUSS:** You first!
    - What's your name, Church (etc.)?
  - **Wider support:**
    - A core team providing support and wisdom.
    - Coverage from three Chester Churches.
  - **About myself:**
    - Married to Jo.
    - Academic background.
- **THIRD: What is TTS all about?**
  - **A simple vision – theology must serve the Church.**
    - *This means:* questions / comments welcome.
    - *This means:* resources on TTS website are free.
    - *This means:* I'll try to help in any way I can.
  - **Three key principles:**
    - [A] *"The Scriptures cannot be broken..."* [John 10:35]
    - [B] *"Will not the judge of all heaven and earth do right?"* [Gen 18:25]
    - [C] *"Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour"* [Rom 12:10]

**LOOK:** Matt 22:37 / 1 Cor 14:15 – theology can be **worship!**

"Theology can be a coat of mail which crushes us and in which we freeze to death. It can also be (and this is its purpose!) a praise song of ideas. Which of the two it is depends upon the degree in which listening and praying Christians stand behind it" [Helmut Thielicke]

## [1] The Trinity: Introducing the Matter

**SO FAR:** Introduction to Theology / God as the Great I AM

**TODAY:** Looking at the Doctrine of the Trinity!

**DISCUSS:** What's been our experience of this doctrine?

- **Misunderstood:**
  - E.g. Ligioner's State of UK Theology (ComRes 2018).
    - 93% of Evangelicals believe in the Trinity.
    - 74% believe that Jesus is the first + greatest creation.
- **Held at arm's length:**
  - Anecdotally, I've seen this happen many times.
    - As if it's theology's quantum physics...!
- **Sidelined:**
  - Famously, Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*.
    - BUT ALSO: God may as well just be a theistic God.

→→ [[PIPER SERMON JAM]] ←←

"I love the Trinity. Does that sound strange to you? For most people, it *should* sound strange. Think about it: when was the last time you heard anyone say such a thing? ... Most Christians do not understand what the term means and have only a vague idea of the reality it represents. We don't love things that we consider very complicated, obtuse, or just downright difficult. We are more comfortable saying, 'I love the old rugged cross', because we *think* we have a firm handle on what that actually means and represents. But we confess how little we understand about the Trinity by how little we talk about it and how little emotion it evokes in our hearts.

Yet we seem rather confused at this point because most Christians take a firm stand on the Trinity and the fundamental issues that lead to it (the deity of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit). We withhold fellowship from groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses because they reject the Trinity and replace it with another concept. We hang a person's very salvation upon the acceptance of the doctrine, yet if we are honest with ourselves, *we really aren't sure exactly why*.

It's the topic we won't talk about: no one dares question the Trinity for fear of being branded a 'heretic', yet we have all sorts of questions about it, and we aren't sure who we can ask. Many believers have asked questions of those they thought were more mature in the faith and have often been confused by the *contradictory* answers they received. Deciding it is best to remain confused rather than have one's orthodoxy questioned, many simply leave the topic for that mythical future day 'when I have more time'. And in the process, we have lost out on a tremendous blessing"

[James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* [1998]]

**DISCUSS:** Do you think neglecting the Trinity is a problem? Why?

**[1A] FIRST: It is the faith “once for all entrusted to the saints” [Jd 1:3]**

- **As we’ll see, Trinitarianism defined the content and life of the Church from the very beginning.**
  - (Contra JW’s the other day – ‘Trinity made up 400AD’.)
    - “This is the rule of our faith, the foundation of our building, and what gives support to our behaviour” [Irenaeus – *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* V]
    - Re: the Gloria Patri, the ‘lesser doxology’.
- **To neglect something so catholic is a cause for concern.**
  - Again – death does not get to define the Church.
    - “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” [Heb 13:7]

**[1B] SECOND: All Christian doctrine is Trinity-shaped.**

- Christianity =/= Theism.
- **We can’t think ‘Christianly’ about any aspect of theology if we’re not primarily thinking in Trinitarian terms.**
  - “The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation” [Barth, CD I/1, 301]
    - “With the confession of God’s triunity stands or falls the whole of Christianity, the whole of special revelation. This is the kernel of the Christian faith, the root of all dogmas, the substance of the new covenant. From this religious, Christian concern the development of the Church’s doctrine of the Trinity has sprung. What was really at issue was not a metaphysical theorem or philosophical speculation but the very heart and essence of the Christian religion itself. So strongly was this felt that all who still set store by the name of ‘Christian’ acknowledge and honour a positive Trinity. In every Christian confession and dogmatics the deepest question is this; how can God be one and yet also three? And precisely in proportion as this question is answered does Christian truth come either less or more into its own in all parts of Christian doctrine. In the doctrine of the Trinity beats the heart of the whole revelation of God for the redemption of mankind” [Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* 1918, Vol II, p. 346f] – **LEADING TO... → →**

**[1C] THIRD: To study the Trinity is to listen to the heartbeat of God.**

- Not just because it’s precious to him.
  - But because it’s ***the most intricate and intimate of all God’s self-revelations.***
    - Not just a revelation of what God is DOING, but a tear in the veil – an insight into who (and what) God IS.
    - Closest parallel is Exo 3.
    - **The Trinity is the jewel in the crown of Christian theology.**
- (NOTE: going forward, ask questions!)

## [2] Describing the Trinity – Apprehending, Not Comprehending

Two very important comments before moving forward.

- **God’s people need *the freedom* to discuss the Trinity** – in which they can say the right things in the wrong way.
  - This is precisely that forum; there is no judgement here.
    - Our theological car park – we’re learning to drive!
- **God’s people need *an opportunity* to discuss the Trinity** – in which they can ask questions and hone our understanding.
  - This is precisely that forum; I will do my best to help.
    - Although sometimes I have to check things too!

**DISCUSS:** A new Christian asks you, “So what’s the Trinity all about?”  
 We can never *comprehend* it – GIGAWAN.  
 But we can *apprehend* it – like Jacob in Gen 32.

### [2A] Defining the Doctrine

- **There is one and only one God – the LORD God of Israel – who has eternally existed as three totally distinct persons, each sharing the same divine being and one united will.**
  - One ‘what’, three ‘whos’. One essence, three hypostases.
    - “One God in three ways” [Barth].
      - E.g. I am human (my ‘what-ness’) but I’m also Nathan (my ‘who-ness’).
      - One being, one person in humans. But God is God.
  - Re: the Athanasian Creed.<sup>1</sup>
- **We can apprehend this even if we cannot comprehend this.**
  - Remember – this is holy ground.
    - This is the deepest and most profound of mysteries.

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<sup>1</sup> We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. ... The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. ... The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity. [Pseudo-Athanasian Creed, probably c. 500s AD.]

**[2B] On the Immanent and Economic Trinity**

- **What does this mean? Certainly not six persons!**
  - *Immanent Trinity*: Trinitarian God in relation with God.
  - *Economic Trinity*: Trinitarian God in relation with us.
    - Inseparable but distinguishable.
      - God's economy reveals his immanence; God's immanence causes his economy.
  - The distinction is an ancient one:
    - E.g. John Scotus Eriugena [815-877AD (Ireland)]:
    - Between God's being + activity. (Cf. Rahner.)
- **Why is this obscure distinction important?**
  - FIRST: it helps us to avoid relegating the Trinity:
    - Again – we really can apprehend the Eco Trinity.
  - SECOND: it also gives us a picture of a vibrant life in God:
    - Perichoresis – mutual indwelling and love.

**[2C] On the Use of Analogies**

- **DISCUSS**: can we think of any?
  - H2O / Clover (fidget!) / Father, Husband, Son / Egg, etc.
- **Augustine's *vestigia trinitatis* – 'footprints' of Trinity.**
  - Analogy of memory, understanding, and will:
    - "Since, then, these three, memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance" [De Trinitate, X:11/17]
      - (I remember what I understand and I use my will based upon that understanding.)
  - Analogy of love
    - Lover / Beloved / Love that passes between them
- **BUT – the question of Trinitarian analogies is not uncontroversial.**
  - For example, about those analogies mentioned before:
    - H2O – modalism / Three leaf clover – partialism / FHS – Unitarianism / Egg – Tritheism.
  - Even Augustine was unsatisfied with his analogies:
    - He accepted the one of love because of its mysterious source.
  - Karl Barth – deeply suspicious:
    - *Analogia Entis vs. Analogia Fidei*:
    - Trinity is a truth revealed through faith by the spirit (CD I/1, pp. 344-345) – creation cannot be a route.

### [3] The Trinity & Scripture

“So wait, Nathan – are you saying we *can’t* apprehend this, then?”  
We can – just not by our terms. The Trinity is a *mystery revealed*.

**LOOK:** 2 Pet 1:3 – “*everything needed for life and godliness*”

- **God has made himself known, and now we have all we need.**
  - “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life...” [West. Conf. I.6a (1647)]
- **DISCUSS:** Does God approve of drunk driving?
  - The answer seems obvious – but HOW do you know this?
    - There’s no verse that says, ‘Don’t drink and drive’.
    - The bible doesn’t even say anything about cars.
- **Scripture speaks INTO some things, and OVER other things.**
  - “... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” [West. Conf. I.6b (1647)]
    - This deduction is not always simple – it requires patience and wisdom.
    - Nevertheless, the Bible speaks into or over all things.

#### **KEY POINT:**

**The Trinity is one of these “good and necessary consequences”.**

No single verse that describes it, in a neat and tidy package.

No formal doctrine until much later.

But that doesn’t mean it’s not Scriptural.

**DISCUSS:** How would you justify the Trinity from Scripture?

**[3A] The Trinity is found:** in the NT pattern of worship.

- For the early Church, **the Trinity was experienced primarily as a *doxological reality*** – rather than as a ***dogmatic one***.
  - **LOOK:** “*And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’*” [Gal 4:7] – what is the logic or pattern here?
    - **The early church worshipped the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.**

**[3B] The Trinity is found: in several NT Trinitarian Constructions.**

- We find many examples of the Scriptural authors **putting the Lego pieces together**. (Following the breadcrumbs!)
  - **LOOK:** Rom 8:15-17 / Eph 3:14-17 / Titus 3:4-7
    - “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [Matt 28:19]

**[3C] The Trinity is found: as a necessary consequence of NT Theology.**

1. **LOOK:** Deut 6:4 – There is only **one God**.
  - **DISCUSS:** What *can't* we now believe, because of this?
    - Polytheism / tri-theism, atheism, etc.
2. **LOOK:** Matt 6:9 – The Father is both **divine and personal**.
  - **DISCUSS:** What *can't* we now believe, because of this?
    - Deism, Hellenic Theism, etc.
3. **LOOK:** John 1:1 – The Son is both **divine** and personal.
  - **DISCUSS:** What *can't* we now believe, because of this?
    - Arianism, Adoptionism, etc.
4. **LOOK:** John 14:26 – The Spirit is both **divine and personal**.
  - **DISCUSS:** What *can't* we now believe, because of this?
    - Binitarianism, spiritualism, etc.
5. **LOOK:** John 14:16-17 – These three are **united but distinct**.
  - **DISCUSS:** What *can't* we now believe, because of this?
    - Modalism / Sabellianism, partialism, etc.

After all these have been ruled out – what are we left with?

Answer: only the Triune God, of Scripture and Church history.

**This is why...**

**[3D] The Trinity is found: almost immediately in the early Church.**

- The term ‘Trinity’ itself is coined within a century of the NT being written.
  - Theophilus of Antioch, the Greek *trias* (c.170AD).
  - Tertullian, the Latin *trinitas* (c.200AD):
    - “The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of the Unity; whereas the Unity which derives the Trinity out of its own self is so far from being destroyed, that it is actually supported by it.” [Against Praxeas III]

**The witness then becomes like a tidal wave:**

“[We] bless the Maker of all through his Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost” [Justin Martyr – *First Apology* LXVII]

“For all things, I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Son, through whom with him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now and forever and throughout the ages to come. Amen” [Polycarp, *Martyrdom* 14:3]

“This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity... No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the three I think of him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light” [Gregory of Nazianzus – *Orations* 40:41]

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**[5] Conclusion**

The Trinity is an eternal communion of mutual delight, love and adoration.

Explains the economy of salvation – re: Creation, Incarnation, Revelation, Last Things.

But also remember who he is in himself – this is our God, He is Triune, God is Trinity, and he saves us into eternal communion with himself.

[[ ALL PRAISE TO HIM ]]