THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Belief Topic: The Trinity Spring 2024

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This session focused upon the great mystery that serves as the central doctrine of the Christian faith: God's triune nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What is the Big Idea?

Christians are *monotheists*. We believe there is only one God (*mono* = one, *theos* = god). But there is more than one type of monotheist. For example, Jews and Muslims are **unitarian monotheists**. They believe the one God exists as a single person. Christians, on the other hand, are **Trinitarian monotheists**. We believe the one God exists as three persons, each of whom is distinct eternally from the others, but all of whom are fully God.

The Trinity is a mystery we cannot fully wrap our minds around, yet one the Scriptures reveal. That God is a Trinity is progressively revealed through the canon of Scripture. This truth is present in shadow form in the Old Testament and more clearly affirmed in the New Testament. The Church Fathers synthesized this biblical material as they articulated the formal doctrine of the Trinity.

What do the Scriptures Say?

There is only one God and acknowledging such is the foundational confession of Judaism. This one God is a savior and is in fact the only one who saves. (Deut 6:4; 32:39; Psa 3:8; Isa 43:11; Jonah 2:9)

This one God has a name, Yahweh, through which He reveals Himself to and uniquely relates with Israel. Yahweh means "I am" and is translated into most English Bibles as the word *Lord*. (Gen.15:1–6; Exod 3:13–14)

This one God claims that to worship any other so-called god is to practice idolatry. (Exod 20:3–5a; 2 Kings 17:35)



There are hints that this one God is also in some sense more than one person, especially in Genesis. (Gen 1:1–2; 26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8)

Like all Jews, Jesus believes there is only one God. Yet, Jesus also claims to be God's Son, a claim that is also made by God the Father and affirmed by Jesus' followers. (Matt 3:16–17; 16:15–17; 17:5; 22:36–38; John 11:25–27; 2 Pet 1:17)

Jesus further claims to be God, one with his Father. Like his Father, Jesus claims to be the divine Lord of Israel (Yahweh), a claim also believed by the earliest Christians. (John 1:1-4; 8:58; 10:30; 14:11; 20:24–29; 1 Cor 8:4–6)

Jesus claims to be the Savior, the one through whom God saves, and the only way to be saved. These beliefs are also affirmed by his followers. (John 3:16; 10:27–28; 11:25; 14:6; Rom 10:9–10, 13)

Both God the Father and God the Son send the Holy Spirit into the world following the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is also considered to be divine and is identified as both God's Spirit and Christ's Spirit. (John 14:16–17; 15:26; Acts 1:8; 5:3–4; 1 Cor 2:10–11)

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are often explicitly linked together in Scripture. (Matt 28:19–20; 2 Cor 13:14; Heb 2:3–4; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20–21)

What Has the Church Said?

The Patristic Era (100–600 AD) was dominated by debates about the Trinity. **Modalists** like Sabellius (3rd century) argued God existed in three successive manifestations or "modes" at different times in church history. According to modalism, God is always Father, Son, *or* Holy Spirit, but he is never Father, Son, *and* Holy Spirit.

Unitarians like Arius (4th century) argued God the Father has always existed, but the Son is a lesser divine being whom the Father created. The Arians also downplayed the Holy Spirit's deity.

Orthodox Christians challenged Modalism and Arianism in their writings, most importantly the Nicene Creed, which was written in 325 and revised in 381. The latter edition defends Trinitarian monotheism. We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.

Through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven; He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried.

The third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified. He spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and to life in the world to come. Amen.

The Church Fathers didn't invent the doctrine of the Trinity. Even though the word *Trinity* isn't found in Scripture, early theologians believed this word accurately captures what the Bible teaches about the nature of God.

What Should We Believe?

The one true God whom we worship and serve is a Trinity who reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Trinity are fully divine, sharing everything that it means to be Yahweh. Yet each person of the Trinity is also distinctive from the others: the Son is not the Father, the Spirit is not the Son, etc. Furthermore, each person of the Trinity has eternally existed as they exist now: the Father is the eternal Father, the Son is the eternal Son, and Spirit is the eternal Spirit. The Trinity is not an abstract theory about God or a theological problem to be solved. The Trinity is the one true God who calls upon all people to bow before Him in worship, obedience, and service.

How Should We Then Live?

The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to love God with our mind.

The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us of the importance of guarding the truth.

The doctrine of the Trinity gives shape to Christian prayer and worship.

The doctrine of the Trinity relates to our gospel advance.

It's important that we form Trinitarian believers through our teaching, preaching, and discipleship.

Recommended Resources

Michael Reeves, Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith (IVP Academic, 2012).

Scott Swain, The Trinity: An Introduction (Crossway, 2020).

Fred Sanders, The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (Crossway, 2010).

Robert Letham, The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship, 2nd ed. (P&R, 2020).

Brandon Smith, ed., *The Trinity in the Canon: A Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Practical Proposal* (B&H Academic, 2023).