

THE TRIUNE GOD



This article deals with the following three aspects of the triune God:

- Description of the Trinity
- Analogies of the Trinity
- Importance of teaching about the Trinity

Question: What is meant by the Trinity?

Trinity means “three in one” or “tri-unity.” According to the Trinity teaching, God is one, while existing as three beings or entities. In other words, God is uniplural, perhaps like a family or company. There is unity, but also plurality. The Hebrew word for God, *Elohim* denotes more than one being and is connected with the pronoun “us”, for example, at Creation, after the Fall, and at the Tower of Babel. (See Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7.)

Although the word Trinity is not found in the Bible, the concept combines two clear teachings. First, there is one God – the Creator and Redeemer alone is God. Only he is the life-giver and sustainer of all there is. He is over all, through all, and in all. No other gods are to be served or worshipped, for in reality they are not gods. Secondly, three distinct beings are referred to in the Scriptures as God – God the Father, God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. (See Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 6:4; Nehemiah 9:6; Isaiah 43:10-11; 44:6; Matthew 12:31-32; John 10:20; 20:28-31; Acts 5:3-4, 9; Romans 3:29-30; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:6; Colossians 2:9.)

The fact that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are each mentioned separately, as well as simultaneously shows that they are distinct entities or persons. For example, all three beings were involved in the creation of the universe. God made all things by Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God is pictured as “hovering over the face of the waters.” When Jesus was baptized, the Father affirmed his love for the Son, and the Holy Spirit descended on him as a dove. Later, the Son prayed and gave thanks to the Father, and then fed thousands with a few loaves and fish. On another occasion after a short prayer to the Father, he raised a person from the dead. Upon his ascension to heaven, the Son would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to the earth to empower his followers. (See Genesis 1:2; Matthew 3:13-17; 14:17-21; John 11:38-44; 14:16-18; John 15:26; Colossians 1:16.)

Each member of the Trinity has special functions. For example, God the Father planned salvation before the world was created. At the right time, the Holy Spirit conceived the Son inside a virgin so that he could be born as a human. The Son gave his life on the cross as a sacrifice for human sin. The Father raised the Son from death to life and appointed him as a merciful High Priest. God the Father draws believers to the Son and the Holy Spirit brings the Father and Son into their lives. (See Matthew 1:20-23; John 6:44; 14:17, 23; 16:13-15; 17:24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:1-3; 3:5-7; Hebrews 2:17; 4:15; 1 Peter 1:18-23.)

Question: How can the Trinity be illustrated to better understand it?

While the Trinity is one of the Christian mysteries, some analogies from life may be suggested. The most helpful analogies retain the unity of God while showing a simultaneous

plurality. Some analogies are helpful as far as showing the nature of the mutual relationships in the triune Godhead.

Marriage pictures the Godhead relationship of mutual love and common purpose. The husband and wife, each mutually acting as a lover and a beloved, are one, joined by a bond of love. Each has a separate role, but they are united and working together toward one purpose. They are able to give life and birth to new members of the family, just like God the Father and Jesus Christ impart eternal life and bring about the spiritual birth of children of God. A seventh century Greek theologian, John of Damascus, compared the Trinity to a circular dance with movement, connectedness, unity, closeness, love, joy, and harmony. (See Matthew 19:4-6; John 3:5-8; Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 John 2:25, 28-29; 3:1-2.)

The church – Christ’s followers who by having the Holy Spirit in them have become God’s children – should ideally also reflect the love and unity of the triune God. The church is a spiritual family, albeit imperfect, where members play the roles of mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. Before his death, Jesus specifically prayed for the unity of his disciples and those that would follow them down through time. Love and unity were to be the distinguishing marks of Christ’s followers. Through the Holy Spirit, there can be a continual back and forth flowing of love between God the Father, Jesus Christ, and each child of God. (See John 10:30; 13:35; 14:20-23; 15:8; 17:11, 22; Romans 5:5; 8:10; 1 John 2:24.)

Humans being made in the image of God implies that they are also made in the image of the Trinity – not only as male and female as revealed in Genesis. As such, the human being pictures aspects of the divine Godhead. Each individual consists of body, mind, and spirit. The Bible also mentions three non-physical aspects of the human person as heart, soul, and spirit. In either case, all three ideally work together in unity and harmony, performing their assigned tasks. (See Genesis 1:27; Hebrews 4:12.)

Some have proposed mathematical or geometrical analogies. For example, the Trinity can be conceived as $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ or one cubed (1^3). A triangle is also a possible illustration. The three sides and corners are inseparable from, and simultaneous to, one another.

No analogy of the Trinity is perfect, and care is needed not to create a wrong impression, especially that of three Gods.

Question: Why is the teaching of the Trinity important?

The Trinity doctrine, while it cannot be rationally or philosophically understood, helps to explain God’s relationship with humankind. All three members of the Trinity are instrumental in the process of salvation which involves bringing many sons and daughters to glory.

God the Father, out of love for the world, sent his Son to the earth to reconcile an alienated race to God and to conquer death. Through his Son’s death, God came to share in the pain of humanity. (See Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Hebrews 4:14-16.)

Upon Christ’s return to heaven, both he and the Father sent the Holy Spirit into individuals’ hearts to create a closer bond between humans and God. New believers are baptized or immersed into the triune God. Through the Holy Spirit, God the Father and Jesus Christ come to dwell in them. Believers receive the divine nature which gives them eternal life. They become intimately united with God the Father and Jesus Christ. (Matthew 28:19-20; John 14:16-23; 15:26; 16:7; 2 Peter 1:7-3; Romans 6:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:16.)

Jesus is preparing places for his disciples in his Father’s heavenly house and will one day return for them. At the resurrection, through a miraculous transformation, believers will be glorified and appear as Jesus Christ. An intimate union and fellowship, already foretasted now,

will be established for all eternity. The closeness, love, and harmony of the Trinity will then extend to the born-again, glorified human family. The children of God, as co-heirs with Christ, will receive their promised inheritance and enjoy God's presence forever. (See John 14:2-3; Romans 8:14-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 John 3:1-2; Revelation 21:3-4.)

Comments:

The Trinity is active, dynamic, and creative. A constant stream of love and energy flows from one member to the other and outwards to the created world. There is mutual giving, joy, and fellowship, but also empathy and sharing in the suffering of the creation. Creativity, renewal, maintenance, and sustenance go on without ceasing. A divine plan is purposefully being fulfilled. An ongoing interaction takes place between the triune God and those being saved. Like the sap flowing between the trunk and branches of a tree, the Holy Spirit moves within the Trinity and out to humans – both to believers and unbelievers. The sun shines and the rain falls on both the just and the unjust. Without this continuous flow of energy sustaining life and holding everything together, there would be nothing. (See Nehemiah 9:6; Job 38:22-41; Psalm 104:24-30; 145:14-16; Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35; John 15:4-5.)

Something to Think About

Through the Trinity, the sovereign God is linked to humanity. The apostle Paul expresses this in his benediction: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Do we take time to deeply reflect on the love, grace, and fellowship that freely flow to us from the three persons of the one Lord God? (See 2 Corinthians 13:14.)