

Unraveling the Trinity

Hespeler, May 31, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Trinity Sunday
Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Psalm 8, [2 Corinthians 13:11-13](#), Matthew 28:16-20

Today is known in Christian tradition as Trinity Sunday. And I would like us to realize for a moment how unique that is among the festivals of the Christian church. All of the other major festivals celebrate events in the life of Jesus or of the early church. Christmas celebrates Jesus' birth. Easter, his death and resurrection. Pentecost, as I hope you picked up last week, the birthday of the church.

But today, we don't celebrate an event, but rather a doctrine – a teaching of the church. It is not even a doctrine you can find in the Bible itself, but rather something that the church only figured out some 300 years after the time of Jesus.

A Logic Puzzle

So, I'm at a bit of a loss here today. I want to talk about the Trinity. I do think it is an important doctrine. But I'm not exactly sure how to do that. I know that a lot of the time, when we talk about the Trinity in the church, we approach it as a kind of logic puzzle. We figure that our task, when we talk or teach about the Trinity, is to help people make sense of it.

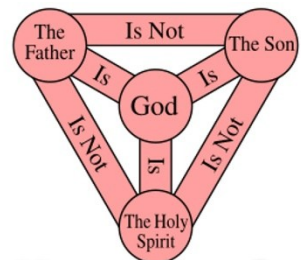
And that is, of course, a huge challenge because, at its core, the Trinity doesn't make logical sense. The idea of the Trinity is that there is one God, and that God is known in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We further say that the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are all God. But we also affirm that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit and that the Spirit is not the Father.

And that, my friends, does not make much sense. And maybe it shouldn't, because the nature of God is supposed to be beyond our human understanding.

Trying to Make it Make Sense

But what do we do when we talk about the Trinity? We try to make it make sense. We use various images to explain it. St. Patrick famously used a Shamrock with its three leaves as a picture of the Trinity. Sometimes people talk about how water can exist in three different states: solid, liquid and gas. These images may be nice to contemplate, but they certainly don't present a complete or accurate picture of the Trinity which is far beyond all physical objects.

These attempts to picture the Trinity leave us with the impression that that is what we're supposed to do with the doctrine – that we are supposed to understand it. It makes us think that if we can just get our minds bent enough out of shape to get them around this idea of God, even for an instant of time, we will have mastered this thing called the Christian faith.



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Problems With This Approach

It also creates a problem for many honest Christians who can't get their minds around this concept. Many will often conclude that, since they cannot make sense of it, they are incapable of having faith. Such people may give up on Christianity altogether.

But the Christian faith is not a logic problem. It is not an exercise in screwing yourself up to believe impossible things. The Christian faith is a journey of trust in connection with a God that we cannot fully understand.

So, my question today is what am I supposed to say to you about the Trinity, other than that it is okay if it doesn't make logical sense to you?

Trinity Is Not in the Bible

Well, let me go back to something that I said a moment ago but that I did not dwell on. I said that the Trinity is not in the Bible. That may have been a surprise to you, but virtually all churches agree that it is true.

Now, the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are all in the Bible. It references all of them and their activities, and it even says some important things about how they relate to one another. But you will not find in the Scriptures any clear statement of their unity or triplicity. But there is a connection between what is in the Bible and the later doctrine.

So, how did we get from what the Bible said in the first century to the doctrine that the church finally agreed to over three centuries later?

How the Christians Experienced God

Well, the Bible is, above all, a record of human beings who experienced God and passed those experiences down until someone eventually wrote about them.

And those early Christians experienced God in many and various ways. They experienced God in Jesus of Nazareth. They experienced God in him during his life, and then even more powerfully in encounters with the risen Christ. They didn't necessarily understand how they had experienced God in this person. They didn't know how such a thing could be. But that failure to understand how didn't really bother them. All they knew was that Jesus had presented God to them in a unique way.

And, in the same way, the early church absolutely experienced the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. This was particularly true when they gathered and worshipped together and supported one another.

Somehow, it was plain to them that when they gathered like that, there was a presence among them that they could not explain. Somehow, the whole of the group was bigger than just the sum of its parts. Even more important, they knew that this presence was divine. But again, they didn't particularly concern themselves with how this could be. They just knew what they had experienced.

Encounter with Greek Philosophy

So, it all started with their experience of God. And as it spread throughout the Roman Empire, the church took the stories of those experiences with it. But the church was now spreading through

a very different culture than the one it had started in, a culture that had been shaped by Greek Philosophy.

And Greek Philosophy was not happy with just experiencing things. It had to analyze and categorize. It had to explain everything. And so there was a great clash of ideas that went on for centuries as the Greek philosophical mind tried to make logical sense of the church's experience of God. It did not succeed because the human mind cannot truly comprehend the nature of God. But it did eventually manage to grapple with it enough to agree to the doctrine of the Trinity.

It was a remarkable achievement. The Trinity, with its internal contradictions and paradoxes, can almost take us to a state of mind where we feel like we just might be able to grasp the nature of God. But it has also left us with the impression that our job as believers is to understand and explain God and it is not. Our job is what it has always been: to encounter the unknowable God.

Setting That Aside

So, on this Trinity Sunday, I would propose that we set aside logic and reason. Put away the shamrocks, the liquid, the solid and the gas and whatever other ways that people have tried to explain it and let us go back to where it all started.

Our reading this morning from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians is the oldest written text that refers to what would come to be called the Trinity. This letter was written, after all, before any of the gospels. Paul was just writing a letter to one of the churches that he had founded, trying to help them sort through their many problems.

As he came to the end of the letter, he was looking for a way to sign off that would be meaningful to them. And so, he wrote, **"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."**

Those are almost certainly the first words referring to the three persons of the Trinity ever written. But Paul isn't trying to *explain* the Trinity, is he? He isn't offering a doctrine. He is giving a blessing to the people of the church – a blessing based on their experience of God.

Living Out the Blessing

That is where it all started. And that blessing, I would suggest, is what really matters. I don't really care if someone can explain the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. That is not what proves to me that you are a faithful Christian. What matters is that you are living out **"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit."**

So here is my question for you on this Trinity Sunday. Have you experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus is himself the personification of this essential nature of God.

The Grace of Our Lord Jesus

If you have experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you know that you are forgiven and that you do not need to torture yourself over your regrets, your failures or your shortcomings. You can accept that you are enough.

If you have experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then grace will also become a part of the way that you look at the world. When you are wronged by someone, you may certainly speak up and demand that justice be done for the sake of all, but you will also not carry around

resentment that weighs you down. You will not contribute to creating future pain by demanding vengeance.

If you have experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you will not be scandalized by the thought that someone you disagree with or that you struggle with, or who has a lifestyle that you do not understand, can still be accepted by God. You will learn to appreciate even such people in the name of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Love of God

And what about the love of God? The love that is in view in this verse is the kind of love of a father at its best that existed in that ancient world. This is a father who knows how to take care of his children. This is a father who can love them for who they are and yet also can love the potential of who they could be.

If you have experienced the love of God, then you know that you are accepted for who you are. You know that you have a God who is committed to love you and to keep all of the promises that have been made to you. If you have experienced the love of God, you know that you have worth because of the God who loves you.

The Communion of the Spirit

And that brings us, finally, to the communion of the Holy Spirit. The word that is translated here as communion is a very important word in the New Testament. It can be translated in various ways. It means fellowship. It means sharing, participation and partnership. So, what does it mean to experience the communion of the Holy Spirit? It actually has less to do with feeling some kind of mystical presence and more about living in community with your fellow believers.

So, how do you experience the communion of the Holy Spirit? You experience it by learning to trust the people in your church in practical ways. We experience it by supporting one another when we face challenges or problems. We experience it when we can courageously share our own struggles, needs and fears with one another. Experiencing the communion of the Holy Spirit is what makes us a church community. It is what empowers us to work together as a team to share God's love with the world.

It is Christians who know these things who are faithful believers. They don't have to be able to explain using Greek philosophy or logic what the Trinity is because they are living it. That is the true foundation of being a trinitarian Christian.