

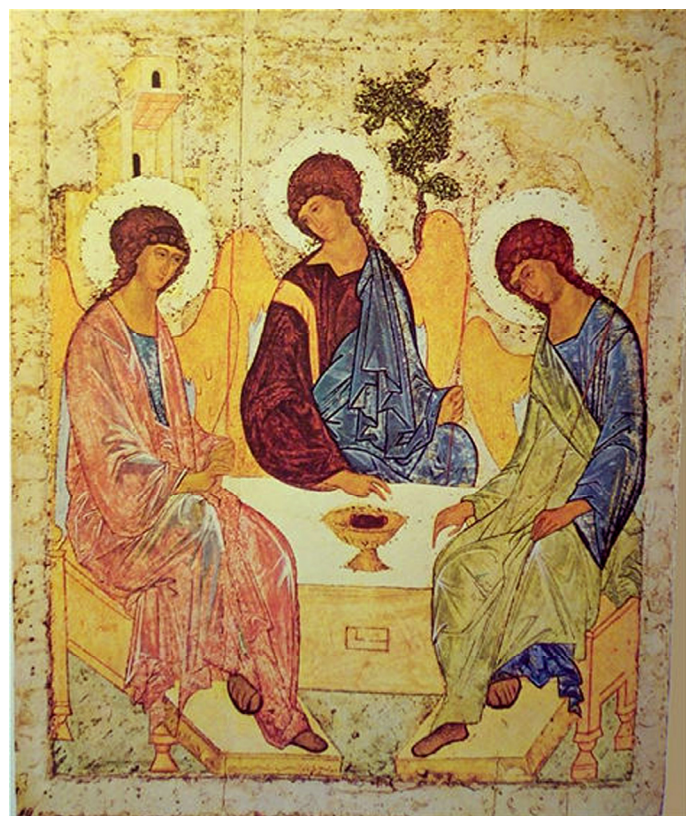
The Trinity

In many ways the most unique and puzzling part of Christianity, the Trinity will ever cause perturbation, confusion and doubt amongst church goers - but what is it about? Why is it considered to be a central tenet of what the church believes and teaches. This sheet is intended to be a series of notes and ideas to help you understand the Trinity.

REVELATION

Humanity could not have invented such a concept as the Trinity for itself. The innate religious impulse in humanity is to conceive of a 'god' as a single unity, a pure oneness, unknowable, distinct from creation. The idea that such a 'god' could be three 'persons' in 'one God', become incarnate, be simultaneously born into creation while remaining God, is beyond comprehension - particularly if such a 'god' does not rule over people as a Pagan demi-god would, but suffers and dies to redeem humanity. Straight away, the moment we try to do theological talk about the Trinity we raise questions about incarnation, redemption, the invisible power and influence of the Spirit, and so on.

In talking about Revelation we are suggesting that what God has to communicate to us is often different to ideas we might come up with for ourselves about God. God reveals to us, but do we continue to invent 'life, religious truth and everything' for ourselves?



THE APOSTLES' CREED

The realization that God was 'Three-in-One' dawned slowly in the early church. There were hints in the Old Testament, there were hints in the sayings of Jesus, and the emerging documents we now call the Gospels and the New Testament. This realization, or understanding, became the bedrock of Christian doctrine and was summarized in the earliest of the creeds - Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living
and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

SCRIPTURE

There is no explicit statement in Scripture of the doctrine of the Trinity, but there are references, allusion, moments of revelation that together point to the Trinity. The Bible teaches that there is one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:4; Galatians 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:5); but that God is also three Persons (Genesis 1:1, 26; 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8, 48:16, 61:1; Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). In Genesis the Hebrew plural noun Elohim is used for God. In Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8, the plural pronoun is used - pointing to plurality in God. In Isaiah

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Anton Rublev, 'The Trinity', 15th century
(after the three angels that visited Abraham at
the Oaks of Mamre - Genesis 18:1-15)

48:16 and 61:1, the 'Son' is speaking while making reference to the 'Father' and the 'Holy Spirit' (see also Matthew 3:16-17 - Jesus' baptism; also Matthew 28:19 and 2Corinthians 13:14 for examples of three distinct Persons in God.)

In the Old Testament, 'Lord' often relates to familial relations, the uncreated Son (Psalm 2:7, 12; Proverbs 30:2-4), while the Holy Spirit is distinguished from the Son and the 'LORD' (Numbers 27:18) and from 'God' (Psalm 51:10-12). God the Son is distinguished from God the Father (Psalm 45:6-7; Hebrews 1:8-9). In the New Testament, Jesus speaks to the Father about sending a Helper, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17). This shows that Jesus did not consider Himself to be the Father or the Holy Spirit. Consider also all the other times in the Gospels where Jesus speaks to the Father. Was He speaking to Himself? No. He spoke to another Person in the Trinity. The 'Son' is everything that the 'Father' is, and those who have seen

the 'Son' have seen the 'Father' (John 14). Each member of the Trinity is divine: the Father (John 6:27; Romans 1:7; 1 Peter 1:2). the Son (John 1:1, 14; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20). and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16).

The individual members of the Trinity have different tasks. The Father is the ultimate source or cause of the universe (1 Corinthians 8:6; Revelation 4:11), divine revelation (Revelation 1:1), salvation (John 3:16-17), and Jesus' human works (John 5:17; 14:10); the Father initiates all. The Son is the cause through whom the Father works creation and upholding of the universe (1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17), divine revelation (John 1:1, 16:12-15; Matthew 11:27; Revelation 1:1), and salvation (2 Corinthians 5:19; Matthew 1:21; John 4:42). The Holy Spirit is the means by which the Father creates and preserves creation (Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; Psalm 104:30) reveals (John 16:12-15; Ephesians 3:5; 2 Peter 1:21) and



The earliest known depiction of the Trinity: Anon., 'Dogmatic Sarcophagus', 350 A.D. Vatican Museums, Rome.

initiates salvation (John 3:6; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2), and empowers the Son (Isaiah 61:1; Acts 10:38)

See:
<http://www.gotquestions.org/trinity-bible.html>

ILLUSTRATION - ANALOGY

The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God — but there is only one God. This is the teaching of the Church, it is the core of Christian doctrine. However, this has always been difficult to comprehend : can we truly comprehend the infinitude of God with our finite human minds. The theologian P.T. Forsyth commented a century ago that to deny that God can be incarnate, finite, is to impose limits on God's infinitude. For God to be truly infinite God can become incarnate as a human baby - to deny this is to limit God and subject God once again to our ideas about how God should be. We can begin to understand what the Trinity is about through illustrations, through analogy (not allegory), that is, *'The Trinity is like this, or that ... but there is no one-to-one correspondence'*

Popular illustrations/analogies:

"Water can be liquid, steam, and ice; they are all forms of water, but not simultaneously."

"The egg analogy fails because the shell, white, and yolk are parts of the egg, not the egg in itself. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not parts of God; each of them is God."

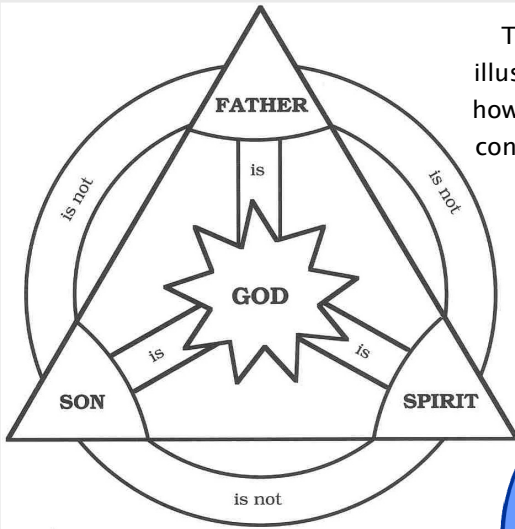
"A woman is a sister, daughter and mother all at the same time, but these are roles (modes), she is not separately or distinctly a sister, a daughter and a mother, she is only one person, different roles."

"A tree can produce more than one top out of the same root. The root represents the one divine nature; the three tops stand for the three persons who share that nature; this is equally flawed but it does point to the three divine persons and the one divine nature."

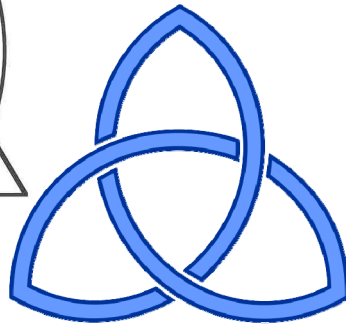
For myself I have always liked the analogy with the Sun, but it is not without its flaws:

"The Sun is perceived, known and comprehended by us as a whole, a unity, yet it is distinctly heat, light and radiation, but all three co-exist in the one. Further, the heat is 'like' the Father, the Son is the light of the world, and the action of the Holy Spirit is often like the invisible and strange behaviour of radiation. Take one element away and the Sun is no longer the Sun, the whole is one, yet each element is distinct - but heat light and radiation are not persons. Also, the Sun is more than these three - it is electromagnetic, it is plasma, solar winds ... all of which , I suppose, like God, makes it paradoxical and ultimately unknowable..."

Problem: can an infinite God be fully described by a finite illustration?



Two popular American illustrations of the Trinity – how do they ‘represent’ the concept of 3-in-1. Do they work? And why?

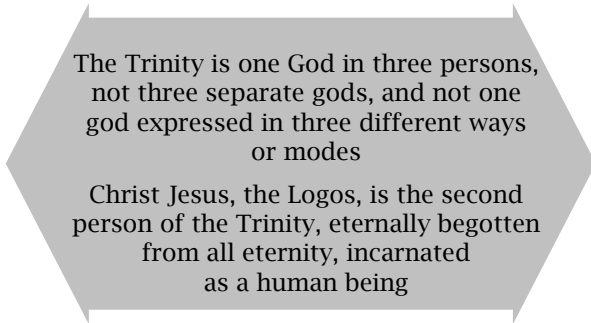


Alternatives
 From *Freemasonry to Islam*, from *Conservative Religious Sects* (Mormons, Shakers, etc) to *Modern Liberalism* (e.g. Hickianity, Armstrongianity, etc), humanity will invent a thousand- and- one ‘gods’ that they consider to be the ONE, the SINGLE. Why does humanity have a never ending capacity for inventing religious truth in its own image?

The danger with talk about the Trinity is that we must always maintain a paradoxical tension between unity and individuation – that is, between stressing the oneness of God, yet the reality of three persons.

Trinitarian Tensions

Modalism
 The danger with Modalism is that the Trinity is just a way of saying that God appears or does things in three different modes. The Son is only an appearance - or mode - of God. The three *persons* of the Trinity do not therefore co-exist in or as the One God



Polytheism
 Too great a degree of individuality leads to three separate ‘gods’ making Jesus Christ either human or a lesser ‘god’. It also means that the father ‘god’ brutalises and kills the son, the lesser ‘god’

Jesus Christ is the most ‘visible’ element of the Trinity; as such when we talk about him we are in effect talking about the Trinity, and our talk, our ideas, can so easily fall down and deny the reality that is Christ. Talk and ideas about Jesus can so easily stray into four areas of what the early church defined as ‘heresy’ (i.e. belief or opinion contrary to orthodox belief)

