

THE MYSTERY OF TRINITY

2 Corinthians 13:13

I invite you to open your Bible this morning to **2 Corinthians 13:13**.

According to a 2020 report from Lifeway Research, Americans hold complex and conflicting religious beliefs. Here's a bit of the findings.¹

- 54% believe religion is a matter of personal opinion rather than objective truth. 34% believe it *is* objective truth, and 12% don't have a clue one way or the other.
- 48% believe the Bible is accurate in all it teaches, and 51% believe the Bible has the authority to tell us what to do—although responses to morality questions in the survey show that many have no idea of what the Bible tells us to do.
- And get this: 72% believe in the Trinity—one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Looks good on the surface until you read further and find 59% believe the Holy Spirit is a force not a person; 55% believe Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God; and 52% believe Jesus is a great teacher but not God.

The gist of the study is that most Americans, even those who claim to be Christians, hold a muddled understanding of basic Christian doctrines including a foundation doctrine like Trinity. Many in and out of the church are generally clueless as to what Christians believe.

Let's work on that this fall. Christians no longer have homefield advantage in our culture and haven't had for a good long while. As some have pointed out, all our games are away games. Christians live as exiles in our culture. If we are going to thrive in this exile, we had best know what we believe. Otherwise, we get swept up in the swift current of culture's ever-changing opinions and trends. This current does not end in still waters. It is rapidly heading for the falls.

¹<https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/09/08/americans-hold-complex-conflicting-religious-beliefs-according-to-latest-state-of-theology-study/>

So this morning we begin a journey through **the Apostles' Creed**. Historically, Baptists are not creedal people. We have expressed the content of our doctrines through “confessions of faith”—more detailed than a creed. Southern Baptists use what we call “The Baptist Faith and Message.” These are all well and good and worthy of study. But our focus is not what Baptists believe differently from Methodists or Presbyterians or Catholics. Our focus is what do Christians historically believe that most all believers hold in common.

The Apostles' Creed makes that clear. This is the oldest formal creed in the history of the church. Tradition has it that each of Jesus' apostles contributed a line. It shows up in church history in Rome in the latter part of the second century. It was formulated during a tumultuous time in the church amid persecution, disunity, and heresy. The church, as she has done many times across the centuries, felt the need to clarify her beliefs. Thus, the Apostles' Creed—an ancient creed that has lived all these years with small tweaks here and there and continues to be recited in worship services today among Christians across various cultures and denominations all over the world. I grew up in the Presbyterian church, and we recited this creed every Sunday. We are going to learn this creed this fall. Don't worry, I am not trying to make Presbyterians out of you. I'm not trying to make you better Baptists either. I'm trying to make all of us better Christians. We are going to explore the truths of the Apostles' Creed. And we are going to get better footing under our Christian faith. This is important because if you don't know what you believe, you will believe almost anything.

Say the creed together

I hear what some of you are thinking: *“Oh great. We're going to spend from now till Advent on doctrine. Boring!”* Dorothy Sayers disagrees with that sentiment. She says, *“The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama this terrifying drama in which God is the victim and the hero. If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting?”*²

²Cited by Mark Buchanan, “The Real Reality Show,” christianitytoday.com (June 27, 2011).

And we begin with the doctrine of Trinity, a doctrine not specifically spelled out in the Apostles' Creed. You know why? Because the doctrine of Trinity was not officially formulated until the fourth century. The church was practicing Trinitarian faith without a formal expression of it. Christians can't help but practice Trinitarian faith because this is the only way we know and experience God. And thinking of God as Trinity prepares us to think in this creed about God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

Trinity!

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ"—God for us and with us.

"The love of God"—God above us, beneath us, and around us.

"The fellowship of the Holy Spirit"—God among us and within us.

One God in three persons—Trinity.

Blows your mind, doesn't it? There's nothing else like Trinity in the universe. One God in three persons. How can this be? The Bible states that God is one: *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"* (Dt. 6:4). So how can three be one, and one be three? I'm not very good at math, but even I know that doesn't add up. How can God and Jesus be one since Jesus prayed to God? How could Jesus die without also killing God? How can God be on heaven's throne with Jesus at his right hand while simultaneously living in the lives of every believer on earth? It's confusing. There is an old saying in theological circles: *"The Trinity is a doctrine which, if a man does not believe it, he is sure to lose his soul, but if he tries to understand it, he is sure to lose his wits."* Trinity is a mystery.

To try to make sense of it, we grasp for analogies. Augustine looked for an analogy in the human personality. Others look for analogies in the physical realm—the most common being the notion that water can be ice, gas, and liquid yet remain water; or St. Patrick's analogy that a cloverleaf has three leaves but is one leaf. Most analogies are forms of modalism—the false

doctrine that the persons of the Trinity represent three modes or aspects of the divine revelation rather than distinct and coexisting persons in the divine nature. Frederick Buechner took a stab at analogy too. He writes:

If the idea of God as both Three and One seems farfetched and obfuscating, look in the mirror someday.

There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face, which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have that enables you to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know about it but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and indivisibly the one and only you.³

Creative but still on the edge of modalism. Analogies can provide bits of understanding, but they all break down because there is nothing *exactly* like Trinity. Trinity is mystery. Mathematically and logically, it doesn't add up.

II

And to complicate matters more, there is no prooftext for Trinity. We believe Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead—plenty of prooftexts for those doctrines. We believe in salvation by grace through faith—plenty of prooftexts for that doctrine. Most doctrines have particular texts that clearly teach the doctrine. Not so with Trinity. Some want to appeal to 1 John 5:7 in the King James Version which reads: *"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."* The problem with appealing to this verse, is that you can't find it in the oldest manuscripts we have of the New Testament. That's

³Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 394-395.

why versions of the Scripture translated from older manuscripts include that verse only as a footnote. Don't bet the house on 1 John 5:7 to proof-text Trinity, or you'll soon be out in the street.

By the same token, don't assume that the Bible says nothing about Trinity. The Bible is where we learn this doctrine. It's expressed in Paul's benediction in our text: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*" Trinity is *expressed* in this text but not *explained*. And this isn't the only text that expresses Trinity. It is intimated in the Old Testament and clearly expressed in the New—only not through one or two authoritative texts on which we can hang our hats and say, "*There it is in black and white: case closed!*" Trinity is expressed in other ways ...

In the Old Testament ...

- In the first two verses of **Genesis 1**, we see God and the Holy Spirit involved in creation. And in the story of Adam's and Eve's sin in Genesis 3 where they succumbed to the devil-serpent's temptation, we read a prophecy of Jesus as the "**hostility**" that will crush the serpent's head (3:15).
- The Old Testament also reveals numerous appearances of the "*angel of the Lord*," a visible being who is often equated or experienced as God. Many scholars consider this angel an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. One example is Gideon's experience in claiming that seeing "**the angel of the Lord**" was the same as seeing God (Judg 6:21-23).
- And we see many occasions of the Holy Spirit speaking through prophets who announce not "*Thus says the Spirit*," but "*Thus says the Lord*."

Trinity is whispered in the Old Testament.

The New Testament cranks up the volume.

- Like in John 10:30 when Jesus claims *"I and the Father are one."*
- Or like in Acts 5:3-4 when Peter equates lying to God with lying to the Holy Spirit.
- Or like in John 20:28 when Thomas falls at the feet of the resurrected Christ and calls him, *"My Lord and my God!"*
- Or like Paul's long doxology we heard earlier in Ephesians 1 that proclaims God's trinitarian work in salvation. Though Father, Son, and Spirit are involved in every aspect of our salvation, Paul declares individual roles: God the Father purposes salvation; God the Son secures it; and God the Spirit applies and seals it.

And Trinity is also expressed in formula ...

- Like in Matthew 28:19, when Jesus told the church to baptize *"in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*
- Or like our text: Paul's apostolic benediction: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

Scripture gives voice to how we experience God, and we always experience God in Trinity. We cannot experience God any other way. Timothy George writes: "Apart from the Incarnation and the Trinity, it is possible to know *that* God is, but not *who* God is."⁴ Alister McGrath puts it this way: *"The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't invented—it was uncovered ... it is the inevitable result of wrestling with the richness and complexity of the Christian experience of God."*⁵ We find Trinity throughout the Scripture. What we won't find are any prooftexts or any formal working out of the doctrine.

III

⁴Timothy George, "Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?" *Christianity Today* (February 2002).

⁵Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988), 148.

That didn't happen until the fourth century at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325.

Like most doctrines in the church, Trinity was formulated in order to dispel heresies that were springing up. Heresies that said that there were really three Gods. Or that God was first the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit, but never all three at one time. And so the church fathers decided to clarify Trinity. Thomas Oden summarizes the bottom-line of what the church has historically said about the Trinity:

It is consistent with Christian experience, Scripture, and tradition, to say that there are three who are God yet one God. For Christian teaching does not say that they are three in the same sense that they are one, which might cause us to say foolishly, "*He are one*" or "*they is three*." God is one. Father, Son, and Spirit are three. God's unity is not a unity of separable parts but of distinguishable persons.⁶

Maybe a picture will help.⁷ Picture in your mind a three-spoked wheel. The hub is God. Each spoke has written upon it the word *is*. The spokes extend to the outer rim of the wheel and to symbols for Father, Son, and Spirit. On the outer rim of the wheel between the symbols for Father, Son, and Spirit are written the words *is not*. Do you get the picture? God *is* Father, Son, and Spirit; but the Father *is not* the Son, nor the Son the Spirit, nor the Spirit the Father. One God in three persons, blessed Trinity. It's a complex oneness, but it's a oneness all the same. And all God's work is done in Trinity. From eternal decrees to God's acts in history, all "are accomplished *from the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit.*"⁸

Athanasias, a 4th century theologian, wrote a creed that helped give early expression to what has become the classic doctrine of Trinity. Here's the short version:

⁶Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 215.

⁷*Ibid.*, 220-221. (Adapted from a picture of "the shield of the Holy Trinity.")

⁸Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 309.

God is one *substance* (or being)—one God—who appears in Christian experience in three *persons*: each is uncreated, immeasurable, eternal, and almighty, co-equal in majesty and glory.⁹

One God in three persons: complex but true. A theological mystery, but don't let your incapacity to fully understand Trinity damage your faith. Science has its mysteries too. Physicists have never finally and perfectly resolved the question of the nature of light. One theory says that it is waves. The other says that it is quanta, little bundles of energy. Logically it cannot be both. Yet, to account for all the data, one must hold both theories simultaneously. As one physics major put it: "*On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, we think of light as waves; on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, we think of it as particles of energy.*"¹⁰ We cannot explain a mystery; we can only acknowledge its presence.

IV

And respond to its truth.

Trinity deepens our appreciation for God's self-giving love. In the communion and fellowship of Trinity, God has everything he needs. God is not lonely. He is not bored. Yet in self-giving love, God determines to create, redeem, and bring into his family all who repent of their sins and believe in the crucified, resurrected Christ. God did not have to do this. He had no "need" to create you. And when you sinned against him, he could have written you off forever. But he didn't. I was blessed to take part in my grandson Benjamin's baptism a couple of Sundays ago. As his daddy baptized him, he said: "*I baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father who sent his Son, the Son who gave his life, and the Spirit who now indwells you, amen.*" God's self-giving love. God, not as a tag-team but in perfect harmony, giving all that God is to save you from your sins and give you eternal life. We are so familiar with this story that it ceases to amaze us. To many of us, it feels more like *old* news than *good* news, but it is the best news there is. In Trinity,

⁹<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/athanasian-creed>

¹⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 341.

God doesn't need you, didn't have to create you, and once you sinned, he didn't have to save you. But he did out of self-giving love. Trinity deepens our appreciation for the largeness and radical grace of God's love.

Trinity also impacts the way we pray. Do you realize you pray to a Father who knows your needs before you ask (Mt 6:8)? You pray in the name of his Son Jesus who joins your prayers with his and makes them better as he intercedes for you (Heb 7:25). And when you don't know what to pray or how to pray, *"the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God"* (Rom 8:26-27). God as Father, Son, and Spirit is engaged in our prayer lives. God collects our prayers, directs our prayers, corrects our prayers, and perfects our prayers so that the effect of our prayers will always be best for us, those for whom we pray, and for the kingdom of God. Every time you pray, you are not just calling on some force in the universe, you are engaging with the God who engages you as Father, Son, and Spirit. Perhaps this will give more energy, urgency, and hope to your prayers, especially when you feel like nobody's listening.

But perhaps the best response, the most logical response we can make to the mystery of Trinity is praise, to stand in awe and wonder in the presence of a God who is beyond our comprehension and yet within the reach of childlike faith. Doctrine is not only an exercise of the mind; it is fuel for worship and praise. The best theology ends in doxology. Will you join the chorus of praise this morning?

Praise God the Father from whom all blessings flow!

Praise him who speaks whole worlds into existence.

Praise him for his holiness and majesty.

For his largeness and vastness.

Praise him who could squash us like grapes under his feet,

and yet in Fatherly love chose to save us instead.

Praise him who hears our prayers and our cries for help,

and who reaches down, in Jesus Christ,
with his long, long arm to lift us up.

Praise! Praise the Father!

Praise the Son!

Praise Jesus who left his throne and his kingly crown
to come to earth for us.

Praise him who showed us the face of God
in a way that would not strike us dead.

Praise him whose eyes are full of compassion
and whose hands are full of grace.

Praise him who for the joy set before him
died for our sin and rose from the grave
to forgive our sins and give all who believe eternal life.

Praise him who is head of the church,
Who one day comes to judge the living and the dead,
and who now, in the Father's house, prepares a place for us.

Praise! Praise the Son!

Praise the Spirit!

Praise the Holy Spirit who is our Comforter and Counselor and Friend.

Praise him who makes his home in us:

who convicts us when we sin;

who comforts us when we hurt;

who encourages us when we're down;

and who prays for us when we can't find the words.

Praise him who tells us the truth
and reminds us of everything that Jesus taught.

Praise him who fills us and grows within us the fruit of love, joy, peace,
long-suffering, and all the rest.

Praise him who gifts and empowers the church
and who alone can conform us into the image of Christ the Son
to the glory of God the Father forever and ever.

Praise!

Praise the Father!

Praise the Son!

And praise the Spirit,

Three in one!

O praise Him, O praise Him!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia ...

to our one God in three persons: blessed Trinity!

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John Scott McCallum II