

“Delighting in the Trinity”

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“Try to understand the Trinity and you may lose your mind. Deny the Trinity and you will lose your soul.” Over the years, I have quoted those words attributed to St. Augustin, numerous times. Usually, I was seeking to make this point: Trying to understand the Trinity is not really a good use of time, because we will never be able to do that. Yet, we need to make sure we affirm our belief in the Trinity because it is an important Christian doctrine.

Folks, I am sorry. That was not good advice. No, we will never fully understand the Trinity, but growing in our understanding is good for our souls. Time spent seeking to better understand who the triune God is and what He is like, is hardly wasted.

Yet, I didn't clearly realize that until I read a book entitled, “Delighting in the Trinity,” by Michael Reeves. Britney Hagsten recommended it, and the Lord used the book to help me realize this fresh insight: Developing a better understanding of the Trinity can help us grow in our love for God and for each other. Let's pause and pray that as I share some of the things I have learned, we might indeed grow in love.

The Trinity. The word is used to describe the triune God in which Christians have believed for almost 2000 years. This is one God, the only true God, one divine being, who exists in three persons. One God in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of these persons is divine, meaning truly God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. And each of these persons is distinct from the other. The Son is not the Father, the Father is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Son, etc. Yet, these three persons are perfectly united, always having the same purpose.

The most common objection to this Christian teaching is that it is irrational. One doesn't equal three and three doesn't equal one. Yet, Christians have never claimed that God is three in the same way He is one, or one in the same way He is three. There is no inherent contraction.

However, Christians did not come up with the concept of the Trinity because it was mathematically or logically intriguing. This is a

revealed doctrine, meaning it is a teaching we have received from God Himself in the Bible. It is true the term “Trinity” or “triune” is not used in the Bible, but that this is who God is, is clearly taught in the scriptures.

A central truth of the Old Testament is that there is only one true God. Yet there are hints of divine plurality right from the beginning. **Genesis 1:26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”** The hints of a triune God are made very explicit in the New Testament. The teaching that there is only one true God continues, yet, in various ways it is clear that there is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Sometimes all three are mentioned, like in **Matthew 28:19** the great commission, where we are told to **Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

Yet, the clearest evidence is the Bible's insistence that not only is God the Father, but Jesus is God the Son. **John 1:1,2 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, He was in the beginning with God.** Who is this “Word?” Jesus! **John 1:14 and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

The Apostle Paul explains Jesus in this way: **Philippians 2:6,7 Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,** (other versions say, “was in his very nature God) **did not count equality with God a thing to cling to, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men.** Jesus was truly humble, but He was also truly God.

According to one count there are 231 times when Jesus is referred to as the Son of God. Various times it is unclear where the term “Lord” or even “God” is referring to the Father or the Son. Both the Father and Son are called the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Revelation 1:8 and 1:18. On numerous occasions Jesus does things that only God can do, such as forgive sins or rightly accept worship. Jesus is God.

Now, the evidence that the Holy Spirit is also God is not as overwhelming, but the New Testament still makes it clear that He is a divine person, existing eternally with the Father and the Son. It is also important to note that the three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, are not merely different manifestations of the same God. I used to give this analogy: Just as water can exist as either ice, liquid, or vapor, God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit. Then I realized that was a very misleading analogy. When water is a solid – ice, it is no longer a liquid and is certainly not a gas. Yet, Father, Son and Spirit all exist at the same time. When Jesus was baptized, He, the Son, was in the Jordan River, the Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit came down in the form of a dove.

Some folks, most notably the United Pentecostal Church, adopt a view that is called modalism. They claim God exists in three different modes, but is always not only the same being, but the same person. They say when Jesus, God the Son, is on Earth, there is no God in heaven. That is a dangerous teaching that needs to be avoided.

But why is that such a big deal? Why is it so important to believe in the Trinity? Isn't believing in God and believing Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead good enough? Well, let me share with you some reasons why the Trinity is not only correct Christian teaching, but it is teaching that, when understood and embraced, can nourish our souls and increase our love and our joy. Again, I am grateful to Pastor Michael Reeves and his book, "Delighting in the Trinity," for helping me see these more clearly.

#1 The triune God, the Trinity, is the true God. Any god different from Him is not the true God. See if this analogy helps. Pastor Mark Anderson. Here are three essential facts about Mark you should know: He is a believer in Jesus Christ, he is a pastor here at Chisholm Baptist, and he is the husband to Brenda Anderson.

If you know those things about Mark, I think you can say, "I know who Mark is." Now, learning more about Mark will help you know him better, but you have a basic idea of who he is. However, is you say, "Yes, Mark Anderson. He is the Buddhist guy that works at Minntac who used to be married to Judy," that would indicate you are talking about a different Mark Anderson. And if you said, "Yes, I know Mark Anderson, but I really

don't know anything about him. I am not sure where he works, or to whom he is married," I would not know whether we were talking about the same Mark Anderson or not.

Folks, the God of the Bible, the true God, is the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some one who says, "I believe in God, but Jesus is not God," is talking about a different God than the Bible describes. Someone who says, "I believe in a 'higher power,' kind of general god, and I don't really care if he is called Yahweh or Allah," is not talking about the God of the Bible. Reeves puts it this way: *Allah exists and functions in a completely different way from the Father, Son and Spirit. If we are content being mere monotheists and speak of God only in terms so vague they could apply to Allah as much as the Trinity, then we will never enjoy or share what is so fundamentally and delightfully different about Christianity.*

Being the triune God is not just a minor detail when it comes to who God is. It is not like, "Oh, I just learned Pastor Mark graduated from high school in Webster, Wisconsin." That is an interesting fact, perhaps, but it probably doesn't change how you relate to him. However, since the trinity, God being triune, is an essential and central aspect of God's being, learning about it can have a big impact on how we relate to Him.

#2 God's most basic identity is as Father. Even more than a creator and ruler of the universe, God is Father. I say that because He was a father long before He was a creator and ruler. In **John 17:24b** Jesus asks His Father to enable His disciples to **"See my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world."**

Long before this universe existed, God was a Father loving his Son. There was never a time when the Father was not loving His Son. This is not a relationship which they grew into, this is part of their very nature. Though there is mutual love between all three members of the Trinity, the Bible's emphasis is the love of the Father for the Son. God is a loving father. Thus, it is no surprise that throughout the Old Testament God presents Himself as a Father to His people, Israel. **Deuteronomy 8:5 Know,, that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord you God disciplines you.** Or **Psalm 103:13 "As a father**

has compassion of his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

My Old Testament professor, John Sailhammer, used to say that the message of the book of Genesis, and really the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, is the Fatherhood of God. Michael Reeves says that is the message of the whole Bible and finds it no surprise that God reveals Himself that way, since that is who he has been throughout eternity, the eternal Father of the eternal Son. “But, Pastor Dan, the Old Testament didn’t understand the Trinity and they did okay.”

Well, not really. Under the old covenant, I would say a healthy relationship with God tends to be the exception, not the rule for folks. One of the great advantages of the new covenant is a much clearer understanding of God’s triune nature. It enables us to understand that God is the eternal Father, not just because He has always existed, but because He has always been a Father. And the more we realize that God rules His creation as a kind and loving father, the more our confidence and joy in His providence will grow.

#3 The Trinity helps us understand why God created the universe and why He created us as human beings. It is common for people to suggest that God chose to create people to fulfill some need or desire on His part. Often the thought is that God is all alone, a perfect being, but one who is lonely. So, He decides to create beings in His image with whom He can have fellowship. In other words, God created us to enjoy our company.

Now, most of you realize that is not the case. Craig preached a sermon a few months ago where he talked about the “aseity of God.” This means, in simple terms, that God does not need anything. He is sufficient in Himself. As the Apostle Paul told the folks in Athens, **Acts 17:24b, 25 God does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.**

Reflecting on the Trinity helps us understand two things. First, God doesn’t need to create because He is perfectly happy within Himself as the Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other in perfect love. We have just celebrated Thanksgiving and

Christmas will be in a few weeks. Think back to one of the most wonderful gatherings you ever had with family members and friends. Multiply that experience by a million and you will catch a glimpse of what it is like to be God the Father, Son and Spirit before the world began. Perfect love, perfect joy, perfect contentment, never a desire for something more. No need to create anything or anyone else.

So why then does God create?

Well, I concede these thoughts are a little more speculative, but seem clear that this magnificent love between Father, Son and Spirit is what leads God to create. I don’t fully understand this, but I think perfect love is a love that is always being shared. The love within the Trinity could never improve, but it could spread. No, God does not learn to share His love, He was always sharing His love within the Trinity. As He creates the universe and makes human beings in His image, He is continuing to spread that love. We might say creation is an overflow of God’s love. As we think about the world in which we live, the people around us, it is good to remember that this is all a result of God’s love.

Yes, it is a fallen world, corrupted by sin, full of evil and natural catastrophes. But it is a world that God will redeem in His way, in His time. And ultimately a new heaven and new earth, inhabited by a vast multitude of people redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ, will be a beautiful reflection of the love of the creator, the triune God. Paul says, **Romans 8:20b, 21 But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.** That is something to which we can look forward.

#4 The most basic characteristic of God is love. That is what the triune God has been doing throughout eternity, loving. **1 John 4:8 anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:16b God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.** Michael Reeves says, “God is love, because He is Trinity.”

And just like the apostle John, Reeves sees this love as something that has huge ripple effects. He says, *For eternity, the Father so loves the Son that he excites the Son’s eternal love in response; Christ so*

loves the church that he excites our love in response; the husband so loves his wife that he excites her to love him back.

In other words, this love is all rooted in the love that eternally flows within the triune God who is love.

Now, over the years I have been a bit uncomfortable with the simple declaration that “God is love.” It troubles me that the phrase is often misconstrued and misused. Some like to say, “If God is love, then love is God.” They understand this to mean that nothing is more important than love, and by love they usually mean romantic or sexual love. That is, of course, not at all what the Apostle John was talking about, but these folks didn’t really care about that.

Others, with a little more theological focus, see the declaration that “God is love” as something that negates other biblical truths. They claim that a God of love could not also be a God of wrath. Thus, the whole idea of hell and sinners being punished is dismissed. It is assumed the God who is love will ultimately save everyone. This view is called “universalism.”

Now this may all sound good, but it is contrary to clear teaching in the Bible. For example, **John 3:36** tells us “**Whoever believes in the Son (Jesus Christ) has eternal life, but whoever rejects the son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.**” Since it is rather obvious that many reject the Son, there will certainly be those who miss out on God’s salvation. Now it would take a bit of time to explore exactly how the God who is love can also be a God of wrath. Yet, since it is the Apostle John who states both truths, I think it’s clear they can be reconciled. And there is no reason why we as believers in Jesus, who have experienced God’s love, should not celebrate the truth that God is love.

#5 The proper response to the triune God is love, to love God and to love others. We are made in the image of the loving Father and Creator. Our very nature is to love. Because of sin, however our love is corrupted and twisted. We continue to love, but become lovers of self, rather than lovers of God. (2 Timothy 3:4) Reeves points out that at the heart of our sin is not our tendency to behave badly, but to love badly. Yet, God the Father so loved the world, that despite our failure to love as

we should, He chose to redeem us through the death and resurrection of God the Son, and the regenerating work of God the Spirit. In doing so He repairs and restores our ability to love as we are intended to love. This is summed up in 1 John 4. **1 John 4:19 We love Him (love God), because He first loved us.** And **1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** And **1 John 4:12b if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.**

When that happens, it is an answer to Jesus’ prayer for is in **John 17:23 that they** (Christians throughout the centuries) **may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.** Friends, the love of the Father for the Son, overflows in the love of the Father for us, His children, which is to overflow in our love for each other. The eternal love of the triune God is made visible through the love you show toward people in this room.

So, folks, I have some new advice: try to understand the Trinity better. Do not be afraid of this complex, but beautiful Christian and biblical teaching. The more you grow in your understanding of the Trinity, the more you will understand who God is, and the more you can get to know God.

Now, knowing about God and knowing Him are two different things. Yet, knowing that God is above all else a loving father, has always been and will always be a loving father, can truly help us know Him better. Friends, may the triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, enable you to not only understand His love, but to experience it in fresh ways, as you trust and follow God the Son, the Lord Jesus.