

The Trinity: Equality and Distinction Within The Godhead

In some churches, they celebrate what is called Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is usually the first Sunday after Pentecost and it is supposed to be a Sunday where churches focus specifically on the doctrine of the Trinity. I don't really like Trinity Sunday, because of what it implies. It implies that the doctrine of the Trinity is a kind of forgotten, esoteric doctrine, that we need to take off the top shelf once a year, dust it off, and have a look at it.

Now imagine if we did that with other doctrines. *Deity of Christ Sunday*. I thought we celebrated that all the time. *Holiness of God Sunday* – isn't that a fixed and continual reality? And so even though I understand and respect what my liturgical friends are trying to do with Trinity Sunday, I suspect they may be making the problem worse: giving credence to the idea that the doctrine of the Trinity is an oddity, worth having a special Sunday for. It is not some kind of strange theological arithmetic where we argue that three is one and one is three, and then leave baffled and confused.

Instead, every Sunday is Trinity Sunday. Every Sunday we address the Father through the Son by the Spirit in prayer. Every Sunday we look for God the Father to show us God the Son by God the Spirit in the Word. Every Sunday we preach and confess that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world, that He offered Himself up by the Spirit to satisfy the wrath of God. We teach that we must believe on and receive the Son so as to become a child of the Father, indwelt by the Spirit. If a church is not robustly trinitarian in its worship, then adding a Sunday to talk about the doctrine really won't do much.

But the Christian faith is essentially trinitarian. That is, the truth that God is triune is not merely optional for us, or additional. The truth that God is three Persons in one God is what we mean by God, it is whom we believe in, whom we sing to, whom we trust. It is essential, fundamental, definitional.

But the way we got here was through the coming and teaching of the Son of God. Now once you agree that Jesus rose from the dead, that He fulfilled prophecy, and that He was who He claimed to be, you land up with the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is through the teaching of Jesus as He makes claims about Himself, particularly as recorded in the Gospel of John, that we have come to the fuller, richer understanding of the one God in three persons. Here in John 5, and again in John 8, John 10, and then most fully in the Upper Room Discourse from John 14 through 17, we learn through the teaching of Jesus about the living God.

What set off this discussion was when Jesus healed a lame man on the Sabbath. When criticised for doing so, Jesus said that He was only working His Father's works. Embedded in that remark were three claims. Claim one: the one you call God is my Father is a unique way. Claim two: I do whatever He does. Claim three (or conclusion): I do the things only God can do.

Now that did not go down well. Verse 18 shows that they understood correctly what Jesus was saying: ¹⁸ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. (John 5:18)

So from verse 19 onwards is an extended defence of this idea: that Jesus is actually equal with God, while being in some way distinct from God. This discussion is to the monotheists of monotheists: strict, Pharisaical Jews.

Now of course, Jesus is doing more than repeating what the Jews of His day already knew about the one true God. He is bringing new truth, new revelation to Israel, to expand their understanding of the one true God. He is among them as Messiah, the Son of the living God, and so He is filling out their understanding of the one true God.

Now there were hints of this all over the Hebrew Scriptures. “Let us make man in our image.” “The LORD said to my Lord.” “The Lord said to His Anointed, You are my Son”. But all of those were not clear enough and explicit enough to teach Israel God's plural oneness. For that, they needed the Word who was from the beginning, who was with God, but yet was God, made flesh and teaching. He exegetes, explains God as no one else can.

So from verse 19 to verse 30 is the first extended teaching that Jesus gives to explain just who the God of Abraham really is. He unfolds three realities about the Creator God.

I. The Creator God is An Absolute Unity

¹⁹ Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel. (John 5:19–20)

Throughout this passage, Jesus is going to use the terms Son and Father. But the first thing he says is that there is such an absolute unity between Son and Father that the Son is not independent, nor is the Father. V19 “can do nothing of Himself”. He doesn't act on His own initiative, on His own authority. It is not just that He *does* not act independently; it is that He *cannot*. He and the Father are such a unity that what the Father does is what the Son does. It was the Father healing the lame man on the Sabbath, so it was what the Son did. The Son just watches the Father and does what He does.

The image may even be likened to when Jesus was with His adoptive father Joseph as a carpenter or builder. He would have watched what Joseph did, and then whatever he did, Jesus would have done in like manner.

Similarly, the Father has no private projects of His own that He keeps to Himself. The Father holds nothing back from the Son, because there is no separation here of will or of knowledge or of motive. Instead, their relationship is one of pure love according to verse 20, which means there is total mutual disclosure. When you love someone, you give yourself to that person, and hold nothing back. The Father shows the Son all He is doing, and whatever the Father shows is what the Son does. Jesus promises that the Father is going to do greater works than healing a lame man on the Sabbath.

Verse 30 repeats this unity.

I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. (John 5:30)

Notice Jesus **does** what He *sees* the Father do in verse 19, and He **judges** what He *hears* the Father say in verse 30. He knows He is doing and judging what is right because He shares the same will with the Father. He does not seek an independent life.

Now what Jesus is making clear here is what Israel was taught all along: there is only one God.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one! (Deuteronomy 6:4)

There are not two gods here with different works they are busy with, different projects. They are not two separate beings with their own wills, and able to act independently of each other. Clearly, whatever this means, it still means one God, a true union of mind, will, purpose and action. The heresies of bitheism or tritheism suggest that there really are separate gods named *father*, *son*, and *spirit*, who live in a kind of council, or a society called God. Or perhaps there are three beings that each occupy 33.3 of God. That's the heresy of partialism. But that is not what we see here. We see the Creator God is an absolute unity.

But as we can already tell, the language of Jesus is teaching a second reality about God.

II. The Creator God is a Distinct Plurality

For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel. (John 5:20)

Now here in verse 20 we see that within this unity there is distinction. If the Father loves the Son, then there is more than one person in God. When you love someone you stand in what we call an I-Thou relationship; a subject doing the loving and the object, the one being loved. That distinction is only possible when you have more than one person. You can't stand in an I-Thou relationship with yourself. You can't say to yourself, “I love you”.

Here we are clearly meant to distinguish the Father from the Son as two persons who are in relationship. From verses 19 to verse 30, the word *Father* comes up 8 times, and 7 times the pronoun He or its inflected forms are referring to the Father. The word *Son* comes up ten times and another 10 occurrences of the 3rd person pronoun comes up. And then 16 times, Jesus uses some form of I, me or myself. All this means there is plurality, more than one in God, and they are distinct from each other.

Notice all the actions the Father takes towards the Son as a distinct person.

In verse 20, the Father not only loves the Son, He *shows* things to the Son.
In verse 22, He *entrusts* the Son with judgement. He repeats this in verse 27.

For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, (John 5:22)
and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. (John 5:27)

In verse 26, the Father *gives* or *shares* with the Son the same self-existent life He has.
For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, (John 5:26)

In verse 30, we read the Father *sent* the Son.
I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. (John 5:30)

Now if the Father loves, shows, commits to, gives to, grants, sends the Son, then we must conclude that the Father is not the Son. We must conclude that the Son is not the Father. So although we began with the truth that God is a Unity – He is One – we cannot take that to mean that within God there is only one Person.

That's how some tried to explain this. They suggested that God is one person, but He has different roles, and takes on different modes. So sometimes He is Father, and sometimes He is Son, and

sometimes He is Spirit, but not at the same time. Some even suggested that He was Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament, and now He is Spirit. This is a false teaching known as modalism, or Sabellianism.

But the words of Jesus clearly refute this. Within God there is a simultaneous distinction. Father and Son at the same time.

This is crucial to the gospel. If Jesus dies on the cross and pays the price for our sins, if He satisfies the justice of God, whom does He satisfy, if there is only one Person in God? There must be a divine Person on the cross, and a divine Person receiving that offering at the same time.

By the way, this is one of the reasons we can say that God is love. It is only because God has eternally had distinction in Himself, that He has eternally had love.

Now, at this point we might want to ask, what about the Holy Spirit? Why is there no mention of the Spirit here? Well, we'll see a generous mention of the Spirit in chapters 14 through 17 when Jesus teaches His own disciples. But here in the context of a hostile audience who were trying to kill Him, He is not going to go further than simply Father and Son. It is already more than they can handle to suggest this kind of plurality in God, you can imagine how they would have reacted had He expounded further to explain the person of the Holy Spirit.

Okay, God is a unity. God is also a distinct plurality. But maybe the way to understand this is to think of one person as being really God, and the other or others as being slightly less God. Maybe, there is a kind of ranking in God, where one is more God than another.

Jesus refutes this with the third reality He teaches.

III. The Creator God is Complete Equality

In this passage Jesus teaches that the Father and He are completely equal in rank, power, authority. He does this in a few ways.

First, He shows that they share the same works. The Son and the Father all perform divine prerogatives; they both do works that everyone understood as belonging to God's power and authority alone. He mentions three works.

The first is regeneration. The power to give spiritual life, salvation, a new heart to the spiritually dead.

Regeneration

For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to *them*, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. (John 5:21)

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (John 5:24)

The Father regenerates, the Son regenerates, total equality. Notice the sharing out of salvation in verse 24: those who hear My Word and believes in my Father. Hearing the word of Jesus and believing on the Father is interchangeable with hearing the voice of the Father and believing on the Son. Total equality.

The second work is

Resurrection

²⁵ Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. (John 5:25)

²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28–29)

Everyone has always understood that God raises the dead. Here Jesus says He raises the dead. Complete equality in works.

The third work is

Judgement

²² For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, (John 5:22)

²⁷ and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. (John 5:27)

The Final Judgement of people, both appraising them and rendering the final verdict has always been understood to be what God does at the end of time. Here Jesus says that in order to honour the Son as being exactly equal to Himself in rank, the Father has made His Son the final judge. This could not have been received well by the people who were busy criticising Jesus and trying to kill Him.

Complete equality in works.

Jesus says the Son shares the divine right of regeneration, resurrection and final judgement. This is complete equality in rank, honour, status.

The second way Jesus shows that there is total equality in the Godhead is made explicit in verse 23.

²³ that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. (John 5:23)

If you don't honour the Son, you don't honour the Father. God wants the same regard, the same love, respect, and indeed, *worship* for His Son that is given to Him.

Total symmetry and harmony, total unity of persons and equality of rank. The person who says, I don't want to talk to God's deputy, I want to talk to God. The Father says, "when you talk to my Son, you are talking to God. He is the Judge, and you will bow the knee before Him." The Father makes the Son both the focal point of faith, and the Judge Himself. The Sovereign and the Saviour.

Again, this becomes a gospel issue. If God the Father has made His Son the focal-point of salvation, and the Judge, then you can't bypass Him and hope to please God.

The third way that Jesus shows complete equality between the Father and the Son is in verse 26.

For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, (John 5:26)

The Father has self-existent life. His life comes from Himself. But because the Father is the eternal fount of the Godhead, His self-existence flows into the Son's self-existence. It doesn't say, the Father has granted the Son to have life. That would mean the Son was created or had a beginning. Instead, it says, as the Father has had self-existent life, so He has become the fountain of the Son's eternal self-existent life. It is not that this life began at some point in time. Instead, eternally, the Father has granted the Son's self-existence, and the Son has received that. That's what makes them Father to the Son, and Son to the Father. But they are co-eternal; co-equal. They partake fully of the

same eternal essence.

Completely equal in works, in honour, in life-essence.

One of the false ways to explain the Trinity throughout history was what is called subordinationism. The idea is that either the Son or the Spirit is a lesser being, maybe divine but not eternal, maybe Messiah, but not Jehovah, maybe exalted to be godlike, but not originally God. This has come in many forms: saying that Jesus was an angel, or created, or a man anointed and then exalted. But in the end, in those systems, there is still a radical difference between the infinite Father, and the more finite Son.

That is not what Jesus taught here. Total and complete equality.

So there is no member of the Godhead who outranks the others, who existed even a fraction of a second before the others, who is more fully God than the others, who should be worshipped more than the others. Complete equality.

Now, having said all that, it is important to say that there is an order in the Trinity. The Son could not have sent the Father to die on the Cross. The Spirit could not have sent the Father to indwell us. Their roles and actions are deeply rooted in their eternal relationships to each other. But that order is not an order of rank or superiority. It is an order of eternal generation, eternal spiration. They have always been Begetter, Begotten, and Proceeding. They have always been Sender, Sent and Sender and Sent One. They have always been God, His Word, and His Voice. The Star, the Light, and the Beam, the Lover, the Loved and the Love.

Now in these few verses, Jesus has fenced off the doctrine of God very clearly. He has affirmed that there is only one God with one will, one purpose, one action. Bitheism and tritheism are idolatry. But He has also affirmed that this one God possesses distinct plurality. Father is not Son and Son is not Father. Modalism, Unitarianism, Christadelphianism, Oneness Pentecostalism, are false. The persons are distinct, simultaneously existing and mutually relating persons.

Finally, He has affirmed that the Persons are completely equal in rank, honour, power and authority. None is subordinate, none is lesser, none is more. Each is fully equal with the others. Arianism, Watchtower Society, these are false teachings. This gives us our doctrine of the Trinity: One God, subsisting in three Persons, co-equal and co-eternal in essence and rank.

So, says someone, why should I know this? Spurgeon answers this way:

“It has been said that “the proper study of mankind is man.” I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height...” No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God....

But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe.... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the

Godhead in the glorious Trinity.

Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And, while humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consolatory.

Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.