



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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The Trinity: Saving Us Completely
Romans 8:9-17

In my thirty-plus years of ordained ministry, I have been asked a lot of hard questions—sometimes from folks in my church, sometimes from professors on tests.

But one of the toughest questions I've ever been asked came from a kid in Bible School.

A young boy, about nine or ten years old, was attending that week. He was expressing interest in becoming a Christian, and he came to talk to me about it.

As we talked, I referred to Jesus as God's Son.

Somewhere along the way, I also mentioned how Jesus was God come to earth as a man. Right in the middle of our conversation, the kid says, "I have a question. If Jesus is God's Son, how can he also be God?"

Have you ever tried to explain the Trinity to a nine-year-old? In fact, have you ever tried to explain the Trinity, period?

The foundation of our faith

Well, on the Christian calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. So it's appropriate, isn't it, that we think together today about the Trinity, the Christian teaching that the one God exists as and has revealed himself to us in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Isn't that what really distinguishes Christianity from all other religions? We agree with our Jewish and Muslim friends that *God is one*, and that he is personal, not just some impersonal force out there. But they part ways with us when we insist that in Jesus Christ, God came to earth to save us from our sins through his death on the cross and his resurrection, and that now God is with us through his Holy Spirit dwelling in us as believers and among us as his church.

Now some will object that you can't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. That's true. And you won't find the *doctrine* of the Trinity fully formulated in the Bible. But the *makings* of it are all over the New Testament! As Alister McGrath puts it, "The Scriptural witness to and Christian experience of God came first, and reflection on it came later."¹

It was actually not until the fourth century that the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity was formulated. Throughout the third and fourth centuries, there were doctrinal debates about the nature of God, often at a very high intellectual level that would seem rather academic to many. But don't dismiss the importance of those debates.

By the end of the fourth century, the doctrine of the Trinity was established within mainstream Christianity, and it's been held as the foundational truth of classic Christianity in all

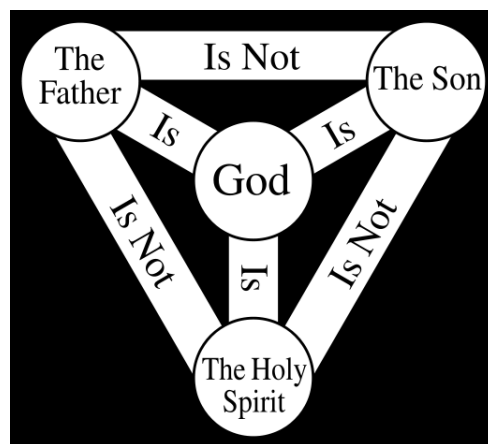
¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 116-117.

its expressions, whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, ever since. Our church's confession of faith (the 1963 edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message*) puts it this way:

There is one and only one living and true God . . . The eternal God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.

Now we can't fully define or explain the Trinity; we can only describe it, because ultimately, it's a mystery.

Some years ago, I ran across a visual representation of this truth that's been helpful to me. Its original form actually dates back to the thirteenth century. It's called the Trinity Shield. You can see one expression of it on the front cover of your bulletin today. Look at it . . .



Over a decade ago now, at a convention meeting I went to eat lunch in the food court in a mall across from the convention center. A well-dressed businessman came up and asked if he could join me. As we talked he asked me why I was in town. I told him I was there for a Baptist Convention meeting. He identified himself as being from another faith, one that sprang out of but rejected classic Christianity. He began to talk about all the things Baptists and his faith have in common, especially in terms of family values and such. I said, "Well, we do have some things in common, but what do you believe about Jesus?" He told me a little about his beliefs about Jesus. I asked, "Do you believe that Jesus is God the Son?"

The official teachings of his faith say that Jesus is *a* son of God. But they don't believe that Jesus is *God the Son*. In other words, they don't believe in the Trinity.

I took a napkin and sketched a version of the Trinity Shield on it to help him understand how Jesus is indeed God. You can see it in the Shield, can't you?

- The Father is God, but the Father is not the Son nor the Holy Spirit.
- The Son is God, but the Son is not the Father nor the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is God, but the Holy Spirit is not the Father nor the Son.

After we talked about it, the man said, "That's very interesting. Could I have that?" I gladly gave it to him. He folded the napkin and put it in his pocket, we exchanged pleasantries, and he left. I sometimes wonder what did or didn't happen as a result of our conversation.

The Trinity's Work in Our Salvation

Now while the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity isn't in the New Testament, the raw materials for it are everywhere. Our text this morning is one of those many passages where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or at least two of the three) are all present in some way. And it tells us about the Trinity's work to save us completely.

Look at what Paul says here. His line of his argument runs something like this.

He's been describing how through Christ's coming and his death and resurrection, God has dealt with sin, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. Those who belong to Christ have his Spirit dwelling in them, leading and empowering them to live according to God's ways rather than their own, in anticipation of sharing in Christ's glory in the resurrection (8:1-11).

As a result, we're under obligation, not to the flesh ("the sinful nature," NIV), but to God. If we live according to the flesh, we will die; but if by the Spirit we put to death the sinful deeds of the body, we will live. Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. The Spirit we have received is not a spirit of slavery, but a Spirit of adoption. By this Spirit we cry, "Abba, Father," as the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are God's children. If we're his children, then we're his heirs, joint-heirs with Christ, sharing in his suffering now and his glory in the resurrection.

Now in the midst of this argument, Paul mentions the Holy Spirit, then the Father, then Christ the Son. What does he say about each one?

How does he describe the Spirit? Well, he says that the Spirit leads the children of God. Notice that—leads, not drives. The Spirit we've received is *not* a spirit of slavery that causes us to fall back into fear; he is the Spirit of *adoption!*

In the ancient Mediterranean world, the Jews didn't practice legal adoption, but the Romans did. In that day and culture, all the inheritance rights went to the sons. So it was almost always sons who were adopted. In fact, the Greek word quite literally means "to place as a son."

So among the Romans, an adopted son had all the rights, honors, privileges, and responsibilities of a son born into a family. He received the family name, and shared fully in the family inheritance, just as adopted children in our system today do.

Paul uses this metaphor of a legal standing in the Roman world that was available only to sons, but applies it to *all* God's children, male and female, declaring that all God's sons and daughters are his heirs.

Paul says that the Spirit of God has brought about our adoption as children of God, with all the rights, honors, privileges, and responsibilities that go with being members of God's family. That includes sharing in Christ's sufferings now, so that we may share in his glory in the resurrection! The Spirit bears witness, that is, he confirms in our hearts, that we are God's children. And by him, we cry out, "Abba, Father!"

That way of addressing God, "Abba," was apparently a part of the early church's worship, going back to Jesus himself. Abba is the Aramaic word for Father. But it's not the very formal "Father"; it's the very touching and intimate word that a little child uses to address his or her father, almost like "Papa" or "Daddy."

Doesn't Paul say a lot about the Father with this? He's not some distant being, who's only our Father by creation, as most of the Jews would have held. He is our loving heavenly Father, who is intimately involved with his children, who knows us and cares for us, and wants a deep relationship with us as his children! He has adopted us and taken us completely into his family. He provides for us now, and he's made us his heirs for eternity!

And what about Christ, the Son of God? Through him, God has dealt with our sin. Through him, the righteousness of the law has been fulfilled in us, as we depend on him and his faithfulness. Now, Paul says, we are co-heirs with him. Paul will go on to describe the Son in verse 29 as “the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (TNIV). He is God’s Son—as the early church fathers would put it, “begotten, not made”; we are God’s children by adoption. As God’s adopted children, we will share the eternal inheritance with the Son! We’ll share in his resurrection glory and live with the Father forever!

So Paul described how God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, brings about our complete salvation.

What Paul says here reminds us that *God works as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to save us completely.*

He gives us *a new relationship*, making us his children by adoption. He gives us the status of sons, so that we share in all the rights of inheritance in his kingdom. We no longer look to God in fear (though we still look to him with reverence). Now we look to him as a little child looks to his or her father—as our Abba!

He gives us *a new way of life*, in which we live in and are led by the Spirit. Indeed, God *dwells in us* through his Spirit! As we yield to and follow the Spirit, he changes our lifestyle radically!

And he gives us *the promise of resurrection*, the promise that we will share fully in Jesus’ glory! We’re fellow-heirs with Christ, to share in all that the Father has given him. We suffer with him now, but we’ll be raised with him, sharing in his glory for all eternity, being made completely like him, with not only our spirits or souls redeemed, but our bodies as well—*saved completely!*

And so . . .

And so how should we respond to this truth of the saving work of the Trinity?

We should *worship* the Triune God. We should stand in awe of this one God who is and reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mystery is greater than we can comprehend. He’s not “the Man Upstairs”; he is the eternal God— Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, and Judge. He’s not my buddy; though he is my Friend, he is *my God!* We can know him as Father, Son, and Spirit, even though we may not understand this great mystery of how he is all three at the same time. But when we truly know him, we will worship him!

Since he has worked as Father, Son, and Spirit to save us completely, we must *trust* him. It’s only through trusting him that we experience this salvation. We must turn from our way to his way, realizing that we can’t save ourselves. We must depend on what *he* has done in Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection to forgive us and set us right with God.

And in trusting him, we will *commit* our lives and our very selves to him, to love and serve him for the rest of our lives. We’ll yield our will to his will, so that we give ourselves to him completely—lock, stock, and barrel.

Have you trusted him? Have you committed your life to him? Are you worshipping him?

†MEG