



Christianity: The Basics — The Trinity

Each year, the Easter season, stretching from Christ's resurrection to the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, reminds us afresh that following in the way of Jesus leads us to the deepest, most inconceivable of paradoxes. It reminds us that Jesus reshapes what we mean when we say "God". You see, the Easter season is immediately followed by Trinity Sunday. We follow the life of Christ through from Advent to Christmas, to his baptism and ministry, to his brutal death, resurrection, and ascension, to his sending of his Spirit among us, and we arrive at the point of mystery which he has been continually pointing us towards. As Brian Daley has noted, we proclaim again each year that we have come to God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, only by passing through the cross and Pentecost.

Our intellect, our faith, our love, are trained through the mystery of Christ to see the living God. The Christian life is essentially about *vision*, and through Christ, by the Spirit, we are learning to see.

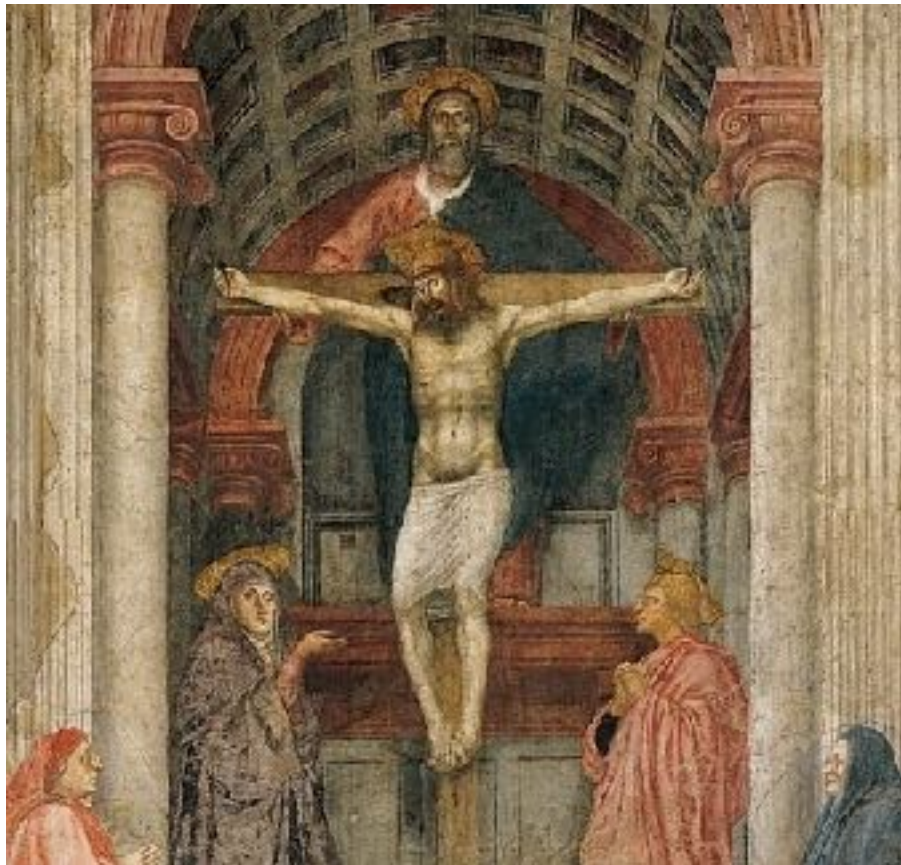
This perspective on the Trinity is perhaps lost on us in the popular Christian imagination. One mention of the Trinity invokes a look of horror on the average church-going face. I mentioned to a few other clergy, in fact, that I would be preaching on the doctrine of the Trinity this evening, and their response was a gasp and a further furrowed brow of concern when I mentioned that I was actually looking forward to doing so!

This is perhaps because Christian theologians have at points diverged from the original function of the doctrine. Thinking of the Trinity in abstract and analytic

terms—working to identify precisely how God is three and how God is one, or what is one and what is three in God—has led to the mystery of the Trinity being treated much more like a puzzle, or a mathematical problem, when it is meant to be an invitation.

John 14 gives us a glimpse of this trinitarian invitation. Jesus tells the disciples that he will soon leave them, but they are not to worry, because he is sending the Spirit to indwell them. Jesus further claims that in seeing him, they see the Father, that the visible, incarnate Christ trains our eyes to see the invisible God. Jesus also promises that those who love him will be indwelled by him and the Father, that they will "make their home" in the one who loves him.

So we see that the Christian life is about vision, and particularly about the vision of God in Christ. To see him is to see the Father, and to love him is to be indwelled by him, the Spirit, and the Father. Something crucial is shown to us here about the revelation or manifestation of God in Christ; about learning to see God. The manifestation that Christ speaks of is not so much 'to' us as 'in' us. And this completely transforms the way we understand God's revelation, and therefore, the Christian life itself.



Masaccio. Holy Trinity. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

The invitation of God's revelation, the invitation into the mystery of the triune God, is always an invitation to come to know ourselves anew. Christ reveals the mystery of the divine life—that the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father—only to then tell us that we have already been indwelt by that very life. The nature of our search for God, of our learning to see, takes on a drastically new shape. The movement into divine mystery, the search for understanding and knowledge of God, the vision of God in Christ, is as much a new vision of ourselves. We, through the coming of Christ, the sending of the Spirit, the grace of our baptism, are made participants in the same divine life and love that the Father, Son, and Spirit share. The entirety of our faith, the entirety of our salvation, is found here, in the life of the Trinity. This is far from an abstract, mathematical puzzle.

This is basically to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is a summation of the entire narrative of our salvation. Throughout the Bible, beginning at the start of the Old Testament, we see a God who is active in the world, and whose activity shows his love for us. In Jesus by the Spirit God's presence among us takes on a radically new manifestation, and a shocking one at that. Jesus is one who calls the God of Creation 'Father' and invites us to join him as his adopted brothers and sisters, so that by the power of the Spirit we too cry out "Abba, Father". The Trinity, revealed not in the abstract but in the concrete humanity of Jesus, is an invitation to join in the divine life.

The vision of God in Christ, then, learning to see God through his presence among and in us in Jesus, is to gain a new vision of who God is and also of what it is to be a human being. Christ shows us what it looks like for the Trinity to include, to receive, human life, and in turn, what humanity looks like when it is taken up into the mystery of the divine life. Christ is at once the triune life of God spilling out over into human existence and human life exalted into the life and love of God.

Because Christ has lived out the divine love in our humanity, the triune life of God has indwelt it, renewed it, redeemed it. The Trinity cannot be relegated to abstract logic chopping, it is a lived, *practiced*, reality. Perhaps the most practical of all Christian doctrines.

This trinitarian faith, this *invitation*, is a far cry from abstract notions about a distant God. This is a far cry from throwing our hands up at attempting to understand how $1+1+1$ can equal 1.

The entirety of our life is a journey on the way to the Trinity, a journey towards seeing God. But on this journey, through this invitation, we are called to great responsibility. The life of God is a self-giving, other-focussed, redemptive, life, and in sharing in it we are to bring that redemption to the world around us. The call of every human being is to follow in the way of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in restoring all things to the Father; so that every act of love, every proclamation of truth, every selfless gift of mercy we can give is in some limited way a sharing in the triune God's care and restoration of the world.

If the Trinity is simply who God is then our lives of following Christ in some way give voice to this great mystery: our prayer, our worship, our love, our mercy, in some sense explain the inexplicable, and join in the work of the Son and the Spirit in God's plan of salvation. The heart of our faith refuses to recognise the trinitarian God in distant abstraction, and proclaims him as our common Father.

Jarred Mercer

The St Mary Magdalen School of Theology

<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-trinity>



Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What does the doctrine of the Trinity teach us about *love*?
2. Christians literally *fought* over the doctrine of the Trinity in the first centuries of the Church. It's easy to dismiss these fights as petty and pointless, but are they? Why do you think early Christians cared about this?
3. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a prelude to a social policy or political philosophy. However, if it is an invitation to love, what might that look like for our lives today?