What Is the Significance of the Trinity?

We better understand God when we better understand the Trinity.

At the very heart of Christian belief is a concept called the Trinity. It’s so central that one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth, said, “Trinity is the Christian name for God.” God is a Trinity of three in one, co-equal and yet distinct, called the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This study will ask: What does it mean that God is a trinity? Why do we believe it? Where do we find it in the Bible? Is this philosophical nonsense or vital to our understanding of God? What difference can the doctrine of a triune God make in our lives?

Scripture:
PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

The Trinity is not simple. But, if you think about it, most of reality isn’t simple. For instance, every one of the trillions of cells in your body is incredibly complex. Even the proteins in your cells are complex. Family relationships are complicated. Football is complex. Most of us can’t figure out our $20 digital alarm clock. And yet, for some reason, when it comes to God, we want simple answers; we don’t want to think. But do we really want a God who is less mysterious than an alarm clock?

The 19th-century philosopher Kant once said that the idea of the Trinity “has no practical relevance at all … whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Divinity makes no difference” in how we live our life. Is that true? Absolutely not. Understanding and experiencing—and please notice that word experiencing—the Trinity has enormous implications for our everyday life.

Opening/Starters:

[Q] How would you explain the Trinity?

[Q] What difference do you think it makes that God is triune?

[Q] Why must we accept the truth of a triune God to understand God?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God is one.

The Trinity isn’t just a concept. The triune God is present among us and ready to meet us. It’s easy for us to approach God as if we’re approaching a frog for dissection—something we can place on a table, cut apart, and explain with detached objectivity. God isn’t like that. God is alive and utterly wild—the most alive and wild being in the cosmos.

What do Christians mean when they talk about a triune God? First of all, we believe that God is one—we are not bi-theists or tri-theists. Thus we can and should pray with our Jewish friends the great prayer called the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). And although every follower of Jesus breathed the air of radical monotheism, they also met Jesus. And when Jesus said things like “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), and when they saw Jesus do things that only God could do—forgive sins, control the forces of nature—they knew that they had met God in the flesh. And then, as Jesus had
promised over and over again, they also experienced the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. Christians did not start talking about the Trinity because they liked the number three; they did so to make sense out of the way God had come to them as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Read John 10:22–38.

**Q** Why were the Jews so reluctant to believe that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah)?

**Q** What proof did Jesus offer that he was the Christ (v. 25)?

**Q** What did Jesus mean when he said “I and the Father are one” (v. 30)? What did the Jews believe he meant (v. 33)?

**Q** What is the proof of Jesus’ deity (v. 37–38)?

**Teaching point two: God is three—diverse, yet unified.**

God is not a solitary monarch but a community of three. The three are one, yet the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally different from one another. Triune language is our frail but necessary way of talking to and about God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the names that God has given us to describe the relationships between the three in one.

God is unity—three in one, three torches burning in one holy flame of love. The idea of the Trinity is like a complex and elegant math equation that holds all of these truths in perfect tension. All kinds of smart people have developed analogies to try to explain how God can be three in one:

- God is like the spring that flows into the stream that flows into the lake (according to the church father Anselm).
- God is like a plant, with the Father as the deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks into the earth, and the Spirit who flowers forth to spread beauty and fragrance (according to the church father Tertullian).
- That God is a Trinity of love means that God is the lover, the beloved, and love itself all at the same time (according to St. Augustine).
- The Trinity is like three torches in which the light of the first passes to the second and then is relayed to the third, until they are all burning in one blaze of holy fire.

Yet all these pictures break down. That’s why Christian thinkers have always said that if we tried to grasp the Trinity, we would be “frenzy-stricken for prying into the mystery of God”

(Gregory the Theologian). This is beyond rational thinking, but that doesn’t mean it’s irrational. We can’t fully understand the concept of the Trinity, but that doesn’t make it nonsensical.
The Trinity does not mean that God is like a pizza cut into three big slices. Nor is God like the three parts of an egg. It does not mean that God has three modes or three disguises—so God puts on a Father hat and creates the world, and God puts on a Jesus hat and goes out to save the world, and then God puts on a Holy Spirit hat.... No, they truly are three in one. When you meet the Father, you meet Jesus and the Spirit.

They all come together. When God created the world, the Son and the Spirit were also intimately involved in creation. When Jesus redeemed the world and saved us from sin, he was resurrected by the Father, and we are born anew through the Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit helps us grow spiritually, it is the very work of the Spirit of Jesus by the Father who sustains us. When we come to faith in Christ, we experience the triune God coming to us: a loving Father who embraces us, a Savior Son who died for us, and the Holy Spirit working in us to help us grow and mature in our faith.

They exist and work together in perfect unity and oneness. There is a perfect sense of giving honor to one another. Jesus gives glory to the Father and the Father gives glory to Jesus. The Spirit gives glory to Jesus. There is not a trace of jealousy, insecurity, hostility, or selfishness.

[Q] Read John 13:31–32. How did Jesus give glory to the Father? How did the Father give glory to Jesus?

[Q] Read John 17:1–5. Jesus prayed for himself as he was soon to face death. How does this passage show the distinctions, and the unity, between the Father and the Son?

[Q] Read John 15:26. What does this tell us about all three persons of the Trinity?

Teaching point three: The doctrine of the Trinity is necessary for us to move ahead as Christians.

Let’s fast forward to 11:00 P.M. tonight. It’s dark and quiet; the day is ending. You’re just finishing your book, reading a blog, listening to your children snore, or eating your last bowl of Wheat Chex. For the past 16 hours as you’ve lived your life, what difference has the doctrine of the Trinity made? There are at least five profound and practical ways that belief in the triune God can change your life:
1. It will change the way you love others—your spouse, friends, neighbors, and fellow pilgrims in Christ.

**Q** Read 1 John 2:5–6. According to this verse, what is the test of knowing the triune God?

2. It will change the way you view God. The Trinity increases our sense of the depth and mystery of God’s nature, which is full of beauty and wonder. God is not boring, and he is not bored. God is bursting with life, love, and activity. God is the most holy, loving, living, creative, and fascinating being in the universe. God is a party or dance of love that has been going on for all eternity.

**Q** List the ways Paul viewed God in Romans 11:33–36.

3. It will change the way you worship. We think of worship in terms of a worship service, but worship is the gift of participating in Jesus the Son’s offering to the Father in the power of the Spirit. Or to use less precise language, God is a party of praise and honor and glory. God is a worship service. Jesus offers his life to the Father. The Father gives glory to the Son. The Spirit leads the Son and gives glory to the Son. So whenever we gather together in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we are invited into that eternal service of praise and worship.

**Q** Read Ephesians 1:17. How does this verse describe how all three persons of the Trinity lead us into knowing and worshiping the true God?

4. It will change the way you pray. The Trinity is already praying for you.

**Q** Read Hebrews 7:24–25 and Romans 8:26–27 and list the ways you are being prayed for according to these verses.

5. It will change the way you receive love. Because God is triune, followers of Jesus believe and live their lives in the love of God.

**Q** Read 1 John 4:16 and Romans 5:5. What does it mean to you that God is love and has enabled you to love?

The Trinity tells us that God was and is love from all eternity, because God is a community of love. And then that love spills over into our hearts. At the end of this day you may consider yourself broken and insignificant. You may be at the end of your rope. You may feel small, dirty, and ashamed. You may feel lost and empty. But you are loved by a three-fold cord of love. Jesus the Son left the glory of heaven to come to Earth—living, dying, and rising again for our sake. The Father has said, “I will offer my only son to save my fallen and wayward people.” The Spirit has been poured out on the Earth and into your heart. And you are invited into the presence of God.
PART 3

Apply Your Findings

God is a party of love, and you’re invited into the party. Jesus the Son has opened the door, the Father stands ready to embrace you, and the Spirit is there to guide you. Do you know yourself as loved?

**Action Point:** Consider how the Trinity can affect your prayers. Ask the living God, the triune God, to come in all his power and majesty and grace and love into your home.

Consider how the Trinity can affect your everyday life. How?