

WHAT WE BELIEVE

- 1. *The Trinity*

(John 14: 1-21)

Introduction

Have you ever thought how hard it is to define what a person is? Probably not. And that's because we just take individualism for granted in our society. For example, we've got a state election coming up and that means one vote for every citizen.

But who says we have to carve up society like that? Why isn't it one vote per family or tribe? Or take it in the other direction, why can't we divide people even further into their subsequent parts – you know the head gets a vote, the arms get a vote, the stomach and so on. That sounds ridiculous doesn't it? The arms can't survive without the head, the legs without the stomach. But it is equally true that I can't survive on my own in our society – I need those who provide water and food, another basic amenities in order to survive. Also for the first 9 months of my life my survival depended entirely on my mother.

And so I hope you are beginning to see that defining the boundaries around a person is not quite as easy as it first seems. And the interesting fact is that the very word we use in this discussion – person – comes from Christians talking about God.

You see, 'person' was originally the Latin word for a mask and it came to mean what we mean by it today through about 400 years of discussion in the Christian church. In the early centuries after the resurrection, followers of Jesus struggled to put into words how God could be one, but at the same time revealed to us in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In time they came up the word 'trinity' to describe God, and they used this word

person, so that they could talk about the three persons of the Godhead.

Therefore, far from being ancient history and long words the trinity is very relevant today. Although you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise. If you go as a tourist to visit the ruins of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire you can take a self-guided tour. The guide book will take you round all the historical features of the original 12th century Abbey. When you reach the ruins of the Chapter house the entry on your guidebook will read, "Here the monks gathered every Sunday to hear a sermon from the Abbott, except on Trinity Sunday, owing to the difficulty of the subject!" (Leslie Newbiggin)

Which is why we are going to answer three questions throughout this series: 1. What? 2. Where from? 3. So what? 1. What – first of all we are going to simply state the doctrine we believe. Most of the time I'm just going to quote from the statement of faith of the Baptist Union. Just so we are clear what it is that we are supposed to believe. 2. Where from? Secondly we are going to spend sometime in a Bible passage to see that what we believe really is in the bible. 3. So what? Also known as the Ben Stockwell principle – what difference does it actually make? Or are we just wasting our time, type stuff!

1. What?

So, let's begin with what we believe about the Trinity. Here is what the Baptist Union says, and it is a pretty good starting point:

The Nature and Unity of the Godhead: *There is one God who is eternal, personal Spirit. He is infinite in power, wisdom, holiness and love. God is Triune in essential being and revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Any statement of faith, any articulation of what we believe must begin with God. And if we begin with God then we begin by saying that he is a trinity, or three in one.

The best way to explain this is by giving you a couple of analogies. But just to show you how difficult the trinity is to explain they are both actually heresies! So when I say that the trinity is a *bit like*, I mean a bit, not completely!

➤ a *bit* like different roles

If the Thomas family will allow me I'm going to use them to illustrate the trinity, and I'm going to use them twice!

First of all talking about God as a trinity is a bit like talking about the different roles people playing a family. So Shine is a Father, a Husband and a Cricketer. One Shine, but three different roles.

As I said God is only a bit like that, because that illustration became known as the heresy of Sabellianism or modalism. The early church rejected it because although it stresses that God is one, it does not allow for diversity in the Godhead. God becomes just one person who wears three different masks – of Father, Son and Spirit.

➤ a *bit* like a family

Okay, let's use another analogy. God is a bit like a family. The Thomas family is one family, united in purpose and vision, but they have three, or in fact four persons. Unfortunately this, too, is a heresy. This time it is the heresy of polytheism. This is what Muslims think Christians believe. Okay, it manages to keep Father, Son and Spirit as distinct persons but it separates them out into 3 different beings. As Muslims say 1+1+1 must equal 3. And if you are worshipping three gods then you end up in total confusion,

which one do you follow? If you want to play mathematical games with Muslims then it is worth noting that infinity + infinity + infinity = you guessed it, infinity.

But that is to miss the point. The trinity is not a mathematical statement of unity, it is a relational one. I picked on the Thomas family because ultimately the trinity is relational definition of God. And the way I hold it together in my head is to think to myself, God is a bit like one person with different roles, but with God the distinction is much, much greater; and he is a bit like a family only he is not three separate beings. Do you see? We want to hold those two images in tension, with the truth being somewhere between them.

2. Where from?

(John 14)

Next question, where from? Does this idea really come from the bible? At this point it would help to turn back to the passage in John 14 that was read for us earlier, p 1067.

You won't find the word 'trinity' anywhere in the bible but the idea that it expresses is very common in the NT. Here in John 14 is a good example of it.

Now I'm not going to spend very long on John 14 now because I'm going to assume that most people have heard of God described as Father, Son and Holy Spirit before. But please don't think that because I'm quick this bit is unimportant. Far from it, this is the most important part. In a moment I'm going to make some pretty drastic applications from the trinity to how we should live. At that point you've got to be convinced that I am fairly describing the trinity from the bible.

I've had to read lots of books on the trinity to prepare for this talk and one of them really annoyed me. The entire book was

applying the trinity to how we live now. Now the author had some really good points to make as well as some not so good points, so it wasn't so much what he had to say that frustrated me. No, what really made the book pointless, as far as I was concerned, was that he simply came up with a definition of the trinity from history and then applied it. He never once showed how his particular view of the trinity was fair to scripture.

So all through the book I was thinking, "Well, yeah, I can see how if God is like that then we should be like this, I get that, but who says the trinity is really like that in the first place?"

So, where in the bible do we get the trinity? Let's look at John 14 together. It's not so much that Jesus explains the trinity here, but rather that the concept of the trinity is the only way we can make sense of what he says here!

➤ The Father is God (John 5: 18)

First of all Jesus talks about the Father who is God. That is pretty clear from verses 1 and 2, the way he moves from trust in God to my Father's house, but it is stated explicitly earlier in John's gospel – "For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." (John 5: 18)

Right, so when Jesus talks about the Father, he is talking about God, the almighty creator of the Universe.

➤ Jesus is God (John 14: 9)

But then Jesus goes on to talk about himself, the Son, in ways that would also describe God. For example, have a look at verse 9 – "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Philip wants to see God and Jesus just tells him, 'Look at me, you've seen me, you've seen

God." However, the Son and the Father are not the same person, for Jesus says that he is the way to the Father. This makes no sense unless there is some distinction between them.

➤ The Spirit is another Jesus (John 14: 16)

And then, to confuse matters further, the Holy Spirit is another Jesus. Look at verse 16 – "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— **17** the Spirit of truth." Another advocate? Yes, another one, like Jesus. After Jesus has ascended to heaven, the Father will send another Jesus, in the form of the Holy Spirit.

Again, the Holy Spirit must be in some sense distinct from Jesus otherwise what's the point of all this going away and coming back again? Otherwise the Holy Spirit is just Jesus wearing a mask – surprise!

No, the Holy Spirit is another person. He is an advocate, a counsellor, these are personal roles. John's gospel was written in the Greek language where nouns are either masculine, feminine or neuter. It is very interesting that the very first time John mentions the Spirit in his gospel he gives him the neuter pronoun because the word Spirit is indeed neuter. However, every time afterwards John deliberately makes a grammatical error by using the masculine pronoun for the Holy Spirit. It's as if John is underlining the fact that Spirit is a person, he is a he.

Okay, the Spirit is another Jesus and if Jesus is God then the Spirit must be too, although the Spirit seems to have a very different role. This is how it is described in chapter 16 – "when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. **14** He will glorify me because it is from me that he

will receive what he will make known to you.” Wow, do you get that? The Spirit’s job is to glorify Jesus, and he does that by taking from Jesus and applying his ministry to the lives of his disciples.

➤ A relational Trinity (John 14: 20)

And all of this underscores the main point here that the trinity is a relational unity. Everything God does, he does together. I know that doesn’t make sense grammatically, but then nor does God. John goes round and round in circles, tracing the dynamics back and forth between the Father and the Son, between Jesus and the Spirit. Round and round it goes and the disciples are sucked into it. The God head is like a wonderful dance people on the outside find themselves seized by a pair of hands and dragged on to the dance floor.

3. So what?

Now we get to Stockwell principle! This is what you’ve been waiting for. I can think of lots of other applications, here’s three topical ones just to get you started. Genesis 1 tells us that we were created in God’s image. And that means to be truly human we should reflect aspects of the trinity.

How we deal with problems (Galatians 4: 4-6)

This transforms how we deal with problems. In our society when something goes wrong then either it is my fault and I’ve got to fix it, or it is someone else’s fault and they’ve got to fix it.

Instead the Bible deals with all problems in a Trinitarian way. God does not sit up there in heaven thinking, “What a mess, you’d better sort it out by the time I’ve finished my coffee break or they’ll be trouble!” Greed, dysfunctional families, polluted planet, injustice

all these things are our problems but God intervenes to sort it out. God the Father, sends God the Son in order to embrace our humanity, to take all our sin, all the problems of the world onto himself, and then on the cross justice is done – in Christ’s humanity we receive the punishment we deserve, the result of God’s righteous anger. And then the Holy Spirit takes from what Jesus has done and applies it experientially to our lives. All that means that we are drawn into a relationship with God the Father through the work of God the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally that is why I used the idea of substitution to explain the death of Jesus – that he died in our place. Because it is the only explanation that is truly Trinitarian. You see the bible uses lots of pictures to explain the death of Christ. In Colossians Jesus is described like a greater warrior defeating the power of the devil. In 1 Peter Jesus gives us an example to copy of how to respond to innocent suffering. Those models are good and they are in the bible, but they are just about Jesus. Only when we start talking about the Son suffering the wrath of the Father to we begin to use Trinitarian language.

Okay, but bring that back to the Stockwell principle. That also means that, on a day to day basis, we need to deal with problems like this too. First of all the gospel means taking responsibility for our actions. If we have stuffed up, we need to put our hands up for it. Stop all the excuses – cop a plea. But secondly, we don’t try to fix it all on our own. We confess our sins to God and ask for his grace to put things right – we ask for the Holy Spirit to apply the cross to our situation. And then we sort out our problems as a community. It doesn’t matter if we are the guilty party or the victim, or most likely it is a bit of both, like the trinity we sort this out together. We can’t storm off in a huff, or ignore the issue and hope

it will go away. If the Father doesn't like the music the Son is playing neither of them have anywhere to go – the Son can't stomp off to his bedroom. They have to sort it out. There is room for great diversity in the Godhead, but not at the expense of unity. All the talk this week about bullying in the playground have centred around this. You can't sort out the problems of bullying by fighting back or ignoring it, it takes a village to raise a child is the maxim – and we see it in the trinity.

This is how Paul sums up the gospel in Galatians 4. Listen out for the roles of the Father, Son and Spirit in this: “when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, **5** to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. **6** Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*”” (Galatians 4: 4-6)

Now that is what it means to become a Christian – we are redeemed by the death of Jesus – but it is also what it means to live as a Christian – living as Sons – part of the family of the Trinity.

How we view authority (Philippians 2: 5-6)

Here's another one. The Trinity challenges our view of authority. Authority gets a lot of bad press these days. Egalitarianism – the call for everyone to be equal – has gained a lot of ground since the days of the French revolution.

Now at first glance the movement has done much good. After all, the trinity underlines the fact that all human beings are equal. If we were created in God's image, and the Father, Son and Spirit are all equal then all humanity should be equal. The problem though is that egalitarianism is based on the principle of individualism – in other words to treats people as strict individuals.

And that means that for everyone to be equal we all have to be the same.

But the trinity is not like that. The trinity shows us equality in difference. In the bible Father, Son and Spirit are described in such different ways and doing different roles. In particular notice the submissive role of Jesus. Here in John's gospel the Son is always obedient to the Father. What we find it so hard to get our heads round is that the Son is still equal. He is equal to the Father and yet happy to submit to his authority.

This is probably best summed up in this famous passage from Philippians 2. Note the call to copy Christ's behaviour: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2: 5-7)

Wow! The implications to how we live are enormous. Let's be honest, most of us function as if we were modalists – you know like Shine being a Father, a husband and a cricketer. In other words God is one full stop. And because we think like that we tend to think that because God is in charge, being like God is having all the authority. In fact if someone's head is getting too big we tell them to pull it in by saying ‘he thinks he's God!’

And yet, and yet, this is the bit that will blow your mind. If Jesus is fully God then it is Godlike to serve and to submit to others. I mean that. I can't remember who is on the roster to clean up the church after the service – but when you spot them getting on with it, you can say – ‘Hey, look at him, he thinks he's God!’ Well he or she is acting like God anyway.

And that is why it is the trinity that undergirds all Paul says in Ephesians 5 and 6. It is illuminating that he begins Ephesians 5

with this command – Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. Not imitators of the Father, or the Son, or the Spirit, but imitators of the triune God. Which is why he can go on in the next verse to use Jesus as an example to follow.

And then later on he lists three pairs of relationship where there are issues of authority and submission – husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. Now what is interesting is that he does not do away with all distinctions of authority. He does not say to them – you're all Christians now so these roles no longer make any difference. He doesn't say, for example, to the children – okay to make it fair you are in charge on Tuesdays, Thursdays and the weekends! No, he maintains the traditional distinctions of authority. But, and it is a big but, he introduces the whole section in verse 21 like this – “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

In other words, be imitators of God, submission and servanthood should come naturally to Christians. Whenever you are in a role where you have to submit to someone else's authority, don't rail against it – embrace it as an opportunity to demonstrate your reverence for Christ. Our society has got it completely back to front. The call we hear for equality is a call for everyone to be in charge. The call of the gospel is exactly the opposite. It is a call for equality because everyone is a servant.

How we view personhood

(John 17: 20-23)

And finally, we see in the trinity a different way to view personhood. If it is possible for me to talk of Jesus as a person but not as a separate being in the Godhead, then I can't define myself as an individual. Jesus is a person but it is meaningless for me to talk

about him without talking about the Father and the Spirit at the same time.

Another wow! This should transform how I view society; how I view democracy, how I view church, everything! With the upcoming election in mind I came across a great political joke this week - “A banker, Alan Jones from 2GB talk back radio and a recent immigrant sit at a table with twelve Portuguese tarts. The banker takes eleven. He then leans forward, points at the immigrant and whispers to Alan Jones “I'd keep your eye on him; he's after your tart.”

In other words we need to think about all the relationships going on in a community and not just the one that I think affect me directly. Once more listen to the way Jesus describes the trinity and the application it should make:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17: 20-23)

Jesus prays for all Christians and he prays for their unity, but this is not a selfish unity, it has a purpose – that the rest of the world might hear the gospel. So that means I can no longer think of myself as an individual – I am a member of the church, the body of Christ, and the purpose of this community is to draw others in.

And that doesn't just apply at a personal level but a family level too. My family is not supposed to be an independent unit – it is supposed to be a loving, united family for the purpose of drawing

others in. Let me illustrate that. Over Christmas we had a big chat with the girls. They knew already that after the Christmas day service everyone was invited back to our house for mince pies. But Emily and I asked them if they minded if we also had people from church over for the Christmas day meal too. And at this point Abi snapped – can't we have some of Christmas day on our own! Now I'm sensitive to the fact the girls miss their extended family at Christmas so at that point I backed off. Every family needs boundaries. After all the trinity isn't a very inviting family to draw people into if the Holy Spirit is out in the shed swearing his head off while the Father has got his headphones so that he can't hear anything! We have to invest internally so that there is love to share around. But I hope you can see that I want my children to see that our family exists to draw others in. After all it is a good job that God is like that. Where would we be if God had so enjoyed his party in heaven with Jesus and the Holy Spirit that he never sent Jesus to earth? Where would we be? We'd shut outside, peering in through the windows at all the fun they were having, glancing nervously at the bouncer preventing entry. It is a really good job that God is not like that.

Instead we worship a God who is trinity – what a joy to know him as Father, Son and Spirit. It means it transforms how we deal with problems, it changes how we view authority and even alters our definition of personhood. God is God and everything else flows out from that.