

I. Today we are continuing our study of Galatians:

A. The first letter written by Paul – perhaps the oldest thing written in the entire New Testament. It was addressed to a group of new Christians living in what is now northern Turkey, who were being led astray by some religious Jews. The big issue was over how we are made right with God. Paul had made it clear that the Gospel is all about the work of Christ Faith = Salvation + Works, not F + W = S. They argued the opposite, claiming that in addition to believing in Christ people needed to check some religious boxes.

B. This is the eighth sermon in this series. I opened with an overview. Message two was about the Gospel. The third message explored our motivation, the fourth looked at truth. Number five was on the Law. We have had a couple on faith.

C. Next week we get to one of the really big themes of the book – freedom. Today, everyone wants to be free, but few understand that even means. Paul wrote that “for freedom Christ has set us free.”

D. Today I am going to talk about the Trinity - which is a term that is not in the Bible,<sup>1</sup> and it sounds like bad math ( $1 = 1$  and  $1 = 3$ ). In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Queen informs Alice that she should believe “as many as six impossible things before breakfast” and many think Christians have one down and five to do. The idea that there are three people who are one God leaves some people confused, others scandalized and still others convinced that Christians are polytheists.<sup>2</sup> But though the word *Trinity* is not in the Bible, the concept is.

1. Deut. 6 makes it clear that there is only one God. But even as the Jews affirmed this – and did so every day when they repeated their most basic creed – the Shemah. “Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God is one.” – they became persuaded that Jesus was also God.

2. They begin talking about Jesus as God. They say: He pre-existed his birth; He created all things; He is judge over all. They began applying the attributes of God to Jesus. And they began applying passages about the Father to Jesus. And then they folded this thinking into their baptism practices – baptizing people into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and requiring candidates for baptism to affirm a three-fold confession of faith – i.e., that they believe in God the Father, and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

3. The Jews are the last people on the planet to think that Jesus could be God. But they did. Without initially trying to describe how that could be possible, they said: 1) there is one God – the Father in heaven; and 2) Jesus is God:

E. I have not spoken on the Trinity in a long time – from time to time I share one of the prayers I repeat often – which I got from John Stott and which is very Trinitarian. And we handed them out today as you walked in. But I have not said a lot more about God’s triunity in a while because it can be a bit heady and mysterious and leave people looking a bit dazed. But I want to today because:

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin said that the term “Trinity” is not critical. It is not in the Bible, and he said that he had no reason to defend it. But about six big ideas fell under it all that mattered a lot. If you get it wrong, grace, atonement, deity of Christ and worship all fade.

<sup>2</sup> Both Jews and Muslims – the two other “great monotheistic religions” accuse Christians of being polytheists.

1. First, because this is who God is. We want to know God – that is the call. Jeremiah 9:23 says, “Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom, or a rich man boast in his riches or a mighty man boast in his might, but let he who boasts boast in this, that they understand and know God. Not know about him, but know Him. We want to know God – to be in an unfolding, deepening, life-giving, abiding relationship with God. That starts when we pay attention to who He is. What we think about God is the most important thing about us. It shapes us in profound ways. It is key that our understanding of God line up with His revelation of Himself.<sup>3</sup> And his revelation of himself is that He is one God in three persons.
2. Second, because it is important.<sup>4</sup> Without the Trinity there is no Gospel – it is God’s amazing nature that allows him to be a God of love and also a God of holiness - both the just and justifier.
3. I am speaking about the trinity today because even though it is important and true, I hear a lot of non-Trinitarian thinking – not anti-, but non-Trinitarian.
4. I want to speak about the Trinity because it is great segue into communion, which is where we are headed.
5. And I am speaking about the Trinity today because it comes up in Galatians 4, as a critical piece of Paul’s argument. Beginning in 3:15 Paul explains that the Father made a promise that through the Son he would give the Spirit to his people. It’s a trinitarian articulation of the gospel, which is central to the book. In Galatians 4:6 he writes: Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*”<sup>5</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. Appreciating the Trinity is critical to understanding the Gospel that is so central to the book of Galatians.

## II. By way of historical overview:

- A. The Bible teaches<sup>6</sup> that God exists as one God<sup>6</sup> - there is one essence - in three persons - Father<sup>7</sup>, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> That is, we have one God in three persons that are co-equal and co-eternal.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Tozer said that what a person thinks about God is the most important thing about him. C.S. Lewis said it was the second most important thing – with number one being, what God thinks about that person.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine once commented about the Trinity that “in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.” More recently, Sinclair Ferguson has reflected on “the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!”

<sup>5</sup> Although the word “Trinity” is famously absent from Scripture, the theology behind the word can be found in a surprising number of verses. For starters there are verses that speak of God’s oneness (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6; 1 Tim. 1:17). Then there are the myriad of passages which demonstrate that God is Father (e.g., John 6:27, Titus 1:4). Next, we have the scores of texts which prove the deity of Jesus Christ, the Son—passages like John 1 (“the word was God”), John 8:58(“before Abraham was born, I am”), Col. 2:9 (“in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form”), Heb. 1:3 (“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his being”), Tit. 2:13 (“our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”)-not to mention the explicit worship Christ willingly received from his disciples (Luke 24:52; John 20:28) and the charges of blasphemy leveled against him for making himself equal with God (Mark 2:7). Then we have similar texts which assume the deity of the Holy Spirit, calling Him an “eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14) and using “God” interchangeably with the “Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:16 and 1 Cor. 6:19; Acts 5:3-4) without a second thought. The shape of Trinitarian orthodoxy is finally rounded off by texts that hint at the plurality of persons in the Godhead (Gen. 1:1-3, 26; Psalm 2:7; Dan. 7), texts like 1 Cor. 8:6 which place Jesus Christ as Lord right in the middle of Jewish Shema, and dozens of texts that speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same breath, equating the three in rank, while assuming distinction of personhood (Matt. 28:19; Gal. 4:6; 1 Cor.12:4-6; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:21-22; 13:14; Eph. 1:13-14; 2:18, 20-22; 3:14-17; 4:4-6; 5:18-20; 6:10-18).

B. This is beyond us. We cannot fully grasp the nature of God. One of the things you run across in the writings of the early church is: *Finitum non capax infiniti*. We get into trouble when we try to make this all make sense.

C. There are two big mistakes people make here. When it comes to the Trinity there are more than two ways to get it wrong, but two mistakes tend to dominate the others: modalism and Arianism.

1. Modalism is the claim that God takes on three different roles, or modalities — i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some attempt to explain the Trinity by saying, one person can fill several roles. For instance, I am the husband to Sheri, the father of Austin, Ben and Jason and the son of Virginia – who I was visiting last weekend. So, I am one person in three roles. This way of thinking is a good example of the heresy of “modalism.” There is a video making the rounds among seminary students that shows two fifth century Irish shepherds interacting with Saint Patrick, who was a real guy – and a good guy.

a) If you read Thomas Cahill’s book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, you know that Irish monks helped pull Europe out of the Dark Ages. Well, Patrick was the one credited with taking Christianity to Ireland. He is represented in this short clip by an icon of Patrick. Let me play a minute of this. PLAY first minute of video of Saint Patrick talking with Irish shepherds

2. The second main heresy is Arianism. It teaches that the Father is the supreme figure and that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to him in some way. Jesus is the highest of all creatures – but he is somehow slightly less than fully God. This view – which was advanced by Arius lead to the first church council, which is where the Nicene Creed was developed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 6:4-5

<sup>7</sup> “Father” isn’t a term we invented to describe God’s relationship to us. God has been the Father of Jesus from all eternity. And we don’t interpret God’s fatherhood through experiences we’ve had with our own father, whether good, bad, or non-existent. We derive our understanding of what fatherhood is from God himself (Eph. 3:14-15).

<sup>8</sup> If you want to read more about the Trinity, consider: *Making Sense of the Trinity*, by Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons* by Allen Vander Pol, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* by Bruce Ware,

<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized in seven statements. (1) There is only one God. (2) The Father is God. (3) The Son is God. (4) The Holy Spirit is God. (5) The Father is not the Son. (6) The Son is not the Holy Spirit. (7) The Holy Spirit is not the Father. All of the creedal formulations and theological jargon and philosophical apologetics have to do with safeguarding each one of these statements and doing so without denying any of the other six. When the ancient creeds employ extra-biblical terminology and demand careful theological nuance they do so not to clear up what the Bible leaves cloudy, but to defend, define, and delimit essential biblical propositions.

<sup>10</sup> The fireworks began in earnest in 318 when Arius publicly accused Alexander, the soft-spoken Bishop of Alexandria, of Modalism. Alexander had been arguing that Origen was wrong to suggest that Jesus was less than 100 percent divine, but was unable – at least to Arius’ satisfaction – to explain how the Father and the Son could both be God without falling into polytheism on the one hand or Modalism on the other. Arius argued that only the Father was divine and that Jesus, while god-like and worthy of worship, was simply the first and greatest of all God’s creations. He was neither omnipotent nor eternal.

Arianism gained a quick foothold in Alexandria and began to spread throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Much of the reason was Arius himself. He drew crowds with his charisma, made difficult concepts easy to grasp and set his aberrant views to popular and easily remembered tunes. Before long the church was facing a major crisis.

D. We can learn about the Trinity by looking at the creeds. Creeds were developed for two reasons. The first is to summarize the most important points for new believers.

1. The Apostle's Creed does this. It is what was taught for And you will see it's Trinitarian theme. It calls on us to say: 1) I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; 2) And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; 3) I believe in the Holy Spirit.

2. Well, the Apostles' Creed left the door open for some to claim that Jesus was not equal to the Father, which highlights the second reason creeds were written – the first is to summarize the key points, the second is more defensive – it is to shut down wrong thinking. The Nicene Creed – which was developed in the fourth century when Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, asked the bishops to help him combat Arius, who was persuading people that Jesus wasn't fully God. They quickly vote 308 to 2 that Arianism is heresy. And then they set out to explain the Trinity more fully, and what they essentially do is say: we can't tell you what it is, but we can shut down wrong thinking.<sup>11</sup>

3. By the way, this is also when the Gloria Patri was written. Last week I was with my Mom – my siblings and I were show and tell. And they sang the Gloria Patri, doing so like most do it. I wanted to say: “people, this is a fight song.”

III. So, we can look to the creeds. We can look at art. IMAGE OF THE TRINITY by Rublev

A. There are various depictions of the Trinity. Given that the second commandment prohibits images of God, we do not have many artists trying to portray an image of the Trinity. But we do get icons.<sup>12</sup>

B. Back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Andrei Rublev, a Russian painter, produced this icon. (By the way, icons are not painted they are drawn and they are not signed because the claim would be they are inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

C. Iconographers would not try to paint God the Father or Holy Spirit, so what we have here are the three visitors to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre. The suggestion is that the one on the left is the Father and the two bowing their heads are son and Holy Spirit

D. They are pictured in a circle, which suggests unity and perfection.

E. The Father is clothed in royal purple, the figure on the left is the Holy Spirit – who is in blue and a pale of green (the colors of life) and Jesus is in the middle. Above him is the Oak of Mamre but also the Tree of Life – and by implication, the cross. He is in red and blue, denoting his two natures as God and Man.

IV. In addition to History, the Creeds and Art, we could also look to philosophy. Some of this can be heady and not very helpful. But some of this ends up being quite devotional or instructive. Two big ideas that we should ponder emerge here:

<sup>11</sup> The Nicene Creed is a statement explaining the Trinity as much as was a bunch of fences around things you cannot say. The key section reads: We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

<sup>12</sup> As you may know – this was one of the reasons for the first split in the church: the Great Schism that happened back in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The real fight was over the power of the bishop of Rome, who some said was in charge – was to be first – the pope - and others said was not. But they fought less publicly over this than they did over the use of icons, which are pictures, mostly of saints, that some people use as an aid for prayer. Those on the west say, “this is an idol,” those from the East say, “no, it's a window that helps me pray.” I am not a fan of icons – do not use them and am not suggesting you use them. I show this one because it was also used to help explain the Trinity. For more on this icon, see: Mary Elizabeth Podles, “A Thousand Words: The Trinity by Andrei Rublev,” *Touchstone*, Jan / Feb 2013, p. 54f.

A. First, the idea that love precedes everything else. In I John 4, John tells us that God is love; in John 17 he writes more about the love that existed between the father and Son and Spirit from before time began; and in the Old Testament one of the words we find used to describe God is a Hebrew term *yazauk* – which is often translated rejoice but can be translated as laughing or playing.<sup>13</sup> The relationship of God with Himself – the three persons who are one God - is the most joyful being in the universe. Full and overflowing with love. When you read the philosopher / theologians who write about this you find them saying things like: the Trinity is a party, there is an eternal dance going on, God is the most joyful being in the universe.<sup>14</sup> What we see in the Trinity is the perfect relationship. And from this there are two pretty significant things to ponder.

1. The first is, we were created because God wanted to share his love and joy not because he needed us. Some mistakenly believe that God needed us in order to have someone to love - an object for his affections. This implies that God had need. That He was incomplete. And it is wrong. God doesn't need us to love. God isn't lonely. In John 17:24 – the high priestly prayer – Jesus says, “Father, you loved me before the foundation of the world.” For eternity, the Father has enjoyed and delighted in his Son. That is Isaiah language. The implication is not that God needed someone to love – in order to be complete – but because the Father is so delighted in the Son, He wills to have this love overflow, Jesus “might be the firstborn of many brothers.”<sup>15</sup> When we reflect on the Trinity we realize, we are being invited into a party.<sup>16</sup>

2. It also means, love comes first, not power. If God exists as one God in three persons, he can know Himself perfectly and love and be fulfilled. He Creates us to welcome us into the love, not b/c he needs love.<sup>17</sup> If there is only one God, then the first thing that really happens is a move of power – the creation - not an act of love.

B. A second big category that the philosopher / theologians write about is that the Trinity is important because it shows the importance of community. When we realize that we were made in the image of God who has always been in relationship – always enjoyed the perfect friendship He can have with himself, we realize the importance of relationships.

1. In Genesis 1 we read that Adam was lonely. He was not lonely because he was sinful, he was lonely because he was perfect, and as a perfect being he was made to love – but he was alone. The Trinity makes it clear, we are communal at the core.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dylan Demarsico, In the Beginning Was Laughter: What Does Joy Look Like and Where Does it Come From? BehemothMag.com.

<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller and others have written about the dance of God. The argument is that they are so focused on the other – so deferential to each other – that each refuses to be the center, so they circle around each other in a dance.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:29.

<sup>16</sup> This helps us understand Jesus' prayer: “Just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, I ask that they also may be in us” (John 17:21). Jesus is inviting us into the life of the Trinity. He wants us to join God's party.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Horrell writes, “In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not ‘big enough’ to be God.”

<sup>18</sup> Community is a buzz word in American culture, but it is only in a Christian framework that communion and interpersonal community are seen as expressions of the eternal nature of God. Likewise, it is only with a Trinitarian God that love can be an eternal attribute of God. Without a plurality of persons in the Godhead, we would be forced to think that God created humans so that he might show love and know love, thereby making

V. There are other reasons the Trinity should shape us and other aspects of God's triune nature that we should reflect on.

A. Let me remind you, God is triune and we want to know Him. And we study to know him. Not to know about him, but to know him. The Trinity is not a math problem to be solved, but a profound truth to be revealed and celebrated. The more we know God the more we will love him, and at the end of the day, this matters. What we love matters more than what we do, because what we love drives what we do.<sup>19</sup> It is critical that we know God more fully. It is critical that we see God as more beautiful and more desirable than sin.<sup>20 21</sup>

B. We should study the Trinity because: 1) it shapes how we pray.<sup>22</sup>; and it shows us that we should be unified and how to do it.<sup>23</sup>

C. I realize that God's Triune nature cause some headaches, but without the Trinity we have bigger problems. And that sets up where I want to end as we head into communion.

VI. It is only with the Trinity that we get both perfect love and justice in one God.<sup>24</sup>

love a created thing (and God a needy deity). But with a biblical understanding of the Trinity we can say that God did not create in order to be loved, but rather, created out of the overflow of the perfect love that had always existed among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who ever live in perfect and mutual relationship and delight.

<sup>19</sup> In an interview on his book, *Delighting in the Trinity*, Michael Reeves says: Yes, the affections are so essential to who we are — so core in both sin and salvation. In sin you see it. Why is it that Eve takes the apple, that the action of her sin actually flows out of her affections, where her heart is, that she desires wisdom — she wants to be like God more than she wants to trust God? She has a love for something else rather than a love for God. And that is how sin works in us. The reason I act sinfully is because I have begun to desire sinfully. I have begun to desire something else more than I have desired God. And this is [James 1:15](#): Desire gives birth to sin, and sin gives birth to death.

<sup>20</sup> The Spirit's work, through the Word, is to open our eyes so that we can see Christ and love Him.

<sup>21</sup> A key verse the Puritans turned to here is 2 Cor. 3:18, which talks about how we are transformed “from glory to glory” *as we gaze at God*. By looking at him, we become like him, because we become like what we worship. When we gaze on God, ponder who He is and what He has done, we see how glorious he is and he wins our hearts to him and we want him more than anything else.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus modeled praying to the Father. We later learn that we approach God in the name of the Son – because He is our mediator, and then Paul explains that the Holy Spirit guides and shapes our prayers and intercedes for us. Rom. 8:26; Eph. 2:18

<sup>23</sup> The bond between people in the church should reflect the unity of the Trinity. Jesus prays to the Father that believers “may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22).

<sup>24</sup> God's desire is that we would experience and know his perfect love. The problem is that our sin makes this kind of relationship with God impossible. Yet, even though we are sinners unworthy of a relationship with a perfect and holy God, there is a way to be reconciled. The Father shows us his love by sending his beloved Son to die in our place. Through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit we can have a relationship with God. He invites us to know and experience the eternal love of the Trinity by faith in Christ! This love is incredible and irrevocable. What could be more amazing than knowing that the Father loves you so much, he did not withhold his only son? What could bring more security and comfort than knowing the Son freely and humbly chose to become human in order to be punished in your place? How encouraging is it to know that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ our savior by faith so that we might know and experience the love of God in this life and for all eternity? These questions only begin to scratch the surface of the countless ways the doctrine of the Trinity offers encouragement.

A. It is only in God's Tri-unity that get the Gospel that Paul writes about in Galatians, because this is the only way we get a God who is both loving and merciful, forgiving and just. To use Paul's language from Romans 3:25, we get a God who is both just and justifier.

B. Think about it. If God is loving and forgives, he is not just. There are times when we want God to be forgiving, but we also want God to be just. When a judge lets a rapist go free in an effort to be nice, we say, "No." But there are times when you are looking for a judge to be merciful. How do you put those two together? You cannot do it with one God in One person. Compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is contrary to justice.

C. But you get that in the Trinity. God the Father acts as righteous judge, and God the Son, is the payment.

D. There are two big mysteries that allow us to be justified. The dual nature of Christ – who is fully Man and fully God. As man he can perfectly represent me in life and death. As God, his death is of infinite value and he can die for you and me.

E. The second big mystery is the Trinity: And in the Triune nature of God we have a God who is perfectly loving and perfectly just. He pays our debt in a way only He could.

## VII. Close – transition into worship and then communion.

A. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah had a famous vision of God. He writes: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim – these are special angels - each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

B. Eight hundred years later, while banished to the island of Patmos, the Apostle John has a vision – which he records for us, it becomes the Book of Revelation. And in it, he reports that the angels in God's presence are still shouting holy, holy, holy, which we refer to as the *Trisagion*.

C. These statements have led to a variety of hymns of worship that include the repetition of God's holiness. One of those songs, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, is also a celebration of God in three persons. There have been many songs that incorporate the Trisagion, the one we are going to sing was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a British pastor – Reginald Heber, and it is great for a few reasons:

1. The line merciful and might captures the idea that God is just and justifier – he is perfecting loving and perfectly righteous.
2. The line "tho the darkness hide thee," reflects the idea that God's triune nature is beyond our comprehension.
3. And it doesn't so much tell us to praise God, it simply assumes we are willing to add our voices to those of the heavenly choirs that has been singing about God's holiness for thousands – millions of years.

D. We are going to sing that know as we prepare for Holy Communion.