

The Trinity – Sinclair B. Ferguson

Knowing the Trinity - Sinclair Ferguson

What difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make in our lives? Today, Sinclair Ferguson begins to unfold the significance of knowing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Welcome to another week of Things Unseen. This week, I want to think with you about the Trinity. I've sometimes said I suspect many Christians think that the doctrine of the Trinity is the most obscure and probably the most speculative doctrine, and therefore, the least practical of all the major Christian doctrines. I remember reading a comment by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, about Roman Catholics actually, and wondering if the same was true of Protestants. He wrote that if God were not Trinity, as far as most Christians were concerned, it wouldn't actually make any difference to their lives.

Three in one and one in three—that doesn't compute in the mathematics that most of us use, and we tend to operate, I think, on the theological principle that if we don't understand something, it can't be all that important. But most of us don't ever stop to think that if that was our life principle, we wouldn't be using our computers, our cell phones; we wouldn't be flying in airplanes. Most of us wouldn't use electricity, or a hundred other things that we do daily. The fact that we may not fully understand the Trinity doesn't mean that the Trinity isn't essential to us.

Perhaps it's worth pausing to ask this question: Has the fact that God is Trinity crossed your mind this last week or the week before? And if so, has it made any difference to the way you think and live? Many of us would almost die to defend the doctrine of the Trinity. But the question here is, Does the doctrine of the Trinity really make any practical difference to us?

Well, first of all, what are we talking about when we speak about the Trinity? We're not claiming we fully understand the Trinity. The Bible makes it clear that we would actually need to be the Trinity to understand the Trinity. But here's what we mean. We mean there is only one God, and this one God exists eternally in a unity of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each of these persons having a distinct relationship to the other two. And we also believe that this is only gradually revealed to us in Scripture, but fully revealed to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B.B. Warfield, the great twentieth-century American theologian, uses, I think, a helpful illustration here. He says, "The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or not at all perceived before."

The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament, but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation and here and there almost comes into view. Thus, the Old Testament revelation is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows, but is only perfected, extended, and enlarged. That fits the opening words of the letter to the Hebrews, doesn't it? God revealed himself in gradual, partial ways in the Old Testament, but now is revealed Himself by Himself, in Himself in the incarnation of the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is a wonderful thing for us to understand. We can describe the Trinity and yet we recognize the Trinity remains a mystery to us. We can know that God is Trinity and know God the Trinity, but we know we can't fully comprehend Him. After all, even seraphim veil their faces in the presence of the One who is holy, holy, holy.

I remember when our children were young, going to say goodnight to one of our sons. He was sitting up in bed looking a bit puzzled. "Dad," he said, "is this right that God is three persons in one?" "That's right," I replied. To which he said, with the trusting innocence of a five-year-old, "Dad, that's a very difficult thing for a wee boy like me to understand." Of course I told him, "It doesn't get any easier when you get older."

But that's the point, isn't it? God's trinitarian nature reminds us that while we can know Him, we do not, cannot, and never will, fully comprehend Him, because He is God and we are not. We are finite, created beings. He is the infinite, uncreated One. In seeking, then, to know Him, we mustn't at the same time fall into the error of reducing Him to our own size. How foolish we would be to think that we are wise when we insist that we would believe in God only if we understood Him. Who do we think we are?

So, there's something humbling about the doctrine of the Trinity, but there's also something wonderful. I think I can put it this way: if you think about it, only a three-personed God can fully experience, in eternity, what it really means to love. Otherwise, He's dependent on creating us. Think about that today because we're going to return to it again tomorrow.

[The Triune God of Love - Sinclair Ferguson](#)

By His very nature, God is love (1 John 4:8). But what—or whom—was He loving before He created the world? Today, Sinclair Ferguson delights in the eternal love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This week on Things Unseen, we're trying to think together about the Trinity, and one of the questions we need to ask is this: Does this doctrine of the Trinity make any difference to us?

I suspect it's the case that one barometer of our theology and our Christianity is found in the themes of the hymns and songs that we sing together in church. I wonder how many modern Christian songs are obviously Trinitarian. Compare that with the way, for example, that Paul just loves to weave references to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit into his teaching. Shouldn't we do the same in our singing?

But back to the question, Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important today? I want to mention one theological reason that I've hinted at already, and I want to do it first by talking about a theologian with whose name you may not be wholly familiar: Richard the Scot of Saint-Victor. Yes, he was actually Scottish, although most of his life he didn't live in Scotland. He eventually became prior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor, on the outskirts of Paris, around the second half of the twelfth century. He died in 1173.

Now, you probably know that theologians and theological traditions have their own particular emphases, don't they? Sometimes we know that something is a special burden, a kind of God-given emphasis to a preacher. Like me, if I were to mention Ligonier's founder, Dr. R.C. Sproul, I think many of us would think of the burden he had to communicate the holiness of God. Well, Richard the Scot belonged to the Augustinian Order of monks, and one of the big emphases in the Augustinian Order—going all the way back to Augustine himself—was the love of God. So, it's not surprising that Richard himself loved to think about the love of God and what it meant.

Now, we tend to think about the implications of God's love for us: "God so loved the world." But Richard began to think about the implication of God's love for Himself; I mean, the implications for God of the fact that God is love. He thought this way: If God is love, as the Apostle John tells us, what does that imply about God Himself? And here is Richard's answer: If God is love, while He is one God numerically, He must also be three persons. Now, of course, he already knew that the Bible taught that God was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He wasn't saying that apart from the Bible we can work out that God is Trinity; he was saying the fact that Scripture tells us God is love helps us to see why it is that God is three persons, God the Trinity.

Now, what was his reasoning? It was really quite simple: if God is love, then He must love, but by its very nature, love isn't self-absorbed. I sometimes say this is why I could never be a unitarian. I think the thing unitarians always insist on is that God is love, isn't it? But if I can put it this way: the unitarian god is like someone who is all dressed up, but he doesn't have anywhere to go. He has an attribute, love, but there's absolutely nothing he can do with it. He becomes dependent on creating us in order to have someone or something to love. Otherwise, he's, well, totally self-absorbed. And that's the point: the unitarian god needs me in order to be happy and, therefore, by definition isn't really God.

So by contrast, you can see why Richard saw great beauty in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Father loves His Son and loves the Holy Spirit. The Son loves the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit loves the Father and the Son. Not only is there mutual love here, but there is a dynamic love here. And you can't help wondering, since God made us as His image, male and female, if this is something that God kind of echoed into our existence—that when a man and a woman are bound together in love, their natural instinct seems to extend the love they share towards another. And so there is the birth of a child. And so there is in the created order of our own lives, a kind of reflection of what is eternally true in God Himself.

And this is something I think that helps us to adore God, the Trinity. He doesn't need to become love. He's always been love. He doesn't need to be satisfied by the created order because He's always satisfied in Himself—God—Father, Son, and Spirit—dwelling in love. And of course, the marvelous thing, the truth of the gospel is that God loves us and in Jesus Christ has acted to save us and sends His Spirit to bring us to Himself. It's no wonder we love God the Trinity, and it's no wonder we love the fact that God is Trinity. And more of that tomorrow.

Baptized into the Triune Name - Sinclair Ferguson

In baptism, we are named for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, claimed by the triune God to live in His family. Today, Sinclair Ferguson explains what baptism teaches Christians about our fellowship with the Trinity.

Welcome to Things Unseen today, and especially welcome if you're new to our podcast. This week, we've been thinking about what is surely one of the profoundest elements, if not the profoundest element in the Christian faith, the Trinity. I love the saying of Augustine, that no doctrine is more difficult or more dangerous than the doctrine of the Trinity, and yet at the same time, no doctrine is more rewarding.

I hope we caught just a glimpse of that yesterday when we were thinking about the fact that God is love, and being love is Trinity, and that these two truths mesh together beautifully. But there's a very obvious reason why we should be more Trinitarian in our thinking than I suspect we actually are. And perhaps it's

also the most obvious reason for saying that far from being speculative and impractical, as people often say, the doctrine of the Trinity must actually be the most basic and the most profoundly practical of all doctrines. The reason is actually so obvious that we rarely notice it, and sometimes we tend to obscure it or divert people away from it. I wonder if you can guess what I'm thinking about.

I'm actually thinking about baptism. It's something that all Christians have in common. I'm not thinking here about the elements that Christians tend to debate together—who should be baptized and how we should baptize. I'm talking about the words that we all use at a baptism—"I baptize you in the name (singular) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"—the words that go back to Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28.

I think it's wonderful to remember that this was actually the first time, if I can put it this way, that the full name of God was ever pronounced. We're baptized into this one name of God, but it's pronounced Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, so that right from the beginning of the Christian life, you and I are called to live in fellowship with the Trinity.

The Trinity is the bedrock of the life of the believer. I think it would be a great pity if, as a minister, when I preached at baptisms or about baptism, I spent most of the time defending one view of baptism or another view of baptism—one mode of baptism or another mode of baptism and whether we do it once or twice or three times—but never actually spoke about the wonder and importance of the fact that we are baptized into the one name of the three persons, and this is the foundation of our whole Christian lives and the communion with God in which we live. I wonder if we spend so much time on things about which we differ that we don't spend enough time on the things that would really cause us to rejoice, living in and acting out the blessedness of our fellowship with the Trinity.

Now, baptism is a naming ceremony, isn't it? The water doesn't change us inside, and yet it isn't that absolutely nothing happens, is it? We're being given a name; we're being named for the Trinity. You could think about it this way. At some point in the first few days of my life, I went through a naming ceremony. It went like this: The city register asked my father and mother, "What is the name of your child?" And they said, "Sinclair Buchanan Ferguson." It's a grand sounding name, but it didn't change anything inside me. I'm sure my mom must have sometimes wished it had. But ever since that moment, at least in my consciousness, whenever I hear the word Sinclair Ferguson, inwardly, I respond: "That's me. That's who I am. That's my identity." If my mom said to me, as she sometimes did, "Sinclair Ferguson," in the way mothers can do, I knew she was saying, "You've been named for this family, but you're not living as though you were named for this family." So baptism as a naming ceremony—it doesn't change us inside.

But in another sense it changes everything, doesn't it? It tells us that our lives have been claimed by God the Trinity, to live in His family, to live out His lifestyle, to live for His praise and glory, and to enjoy Him forever. And it tells us something else. It tells us that as we live the Christian life, we know that the Father loves us and cares for us, we know that the Son loves us and has died for us, we know that the Spirit loves us and is willing to lead us. I'm sure that's what Martin Luther was thinking about whenever he was despondent and went outside and said the two Latin words, *baptizatus sum*, "I've been baptized." I think he was saying: "Martin, remember God the Trinity. Remember that you belong to His family. Remember

you've got a privilege of fellowship with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Now, Martin, go and enjoy it and live it out."

Well, that's a lesson for us today, to let our baptisms remind us of this absolutely fundamental truth about us—that we've been named for God, the Trinity; for the Father, for the Son, for the Holy Spirit, and there's surely nothing more practical than that.

[What Jesus Taught about the Trinity - Sinclair Ferguson](#)

Some Christians wonder if the Trinity is an impractical doctrine. Yet Jesus devoted some of His most important hours with the disciples to teaching this truth. Today, Sinclair Ferguson focuses on Jesus' words in the upper room.

We've been thinking this week on Things Unseen about the doctrine of the Trinity, and I've been trying to explain a little of why it's so important. I've suggested a couple of times now that I think many Christians see it as a kind of speculative and impractical doctrine, and I've been trying to say it's the very reverse. So today I want to try to show in another way why it is so practical, and maybe I can express it in kind of in-your-face way by saying: "Trinity, the least practical doctrine? Tell that to Jesus."

What do I mean? Well, when another Christian seems to express a negative opinion about any Christian doctrine, it's always actually a good pastoral move to say, "Did Jesus say anything about this?" After all, as Christians, we understand that we love and that we trust Jesus. If He believed something, then we are called to believe it. If He thought something was important, then surely we should too. So, where does that take us?

Well, one place it takes us to is the upper room and to the last few hours before Jesus was arrested, recorded in John 13–17. Read through them sometime, asking yourself these questions: Did Jesus think the Trinity is important? And did Jesus think knowing the Trinity would make any difference to the Christian life? I think what you'll find in these chapters is a magnificent tapestry of gospel grace, woven from three threads: the work of the Father, the work of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit. These were, after all, the most sacred hours the disciples had thus far spent with Jesus, and this was certainly the most profound teaching He'd ever given to them. He's teaching them what they needed to know in order to live at a time of great crisis. He was teaching them what was really important, and what He was talking about was the Trinity.

He tells us about His own relationship with the Father and His own relationship with the Spirit—how the Father loved Him and had committed to Him the work of redemption, how Jesus Himself had honored and glorified the Father, and He spoke too about the way in which the Holy Spirit was His Holy Spirit and that He would send that Holy Spirit to them.

So, what was happening in the upper room was that Jesus was talking essentially about the Trinity. He was talking about an event that would take place in His crucifixion, and in His resurrection, and in His sending of the Holy Spirit, in which all three persons of the Trinity would share—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus, the disciples had seen the Father. Remember how when Philip said, "Show us the Father, and that will be enough for us?" Jesus indicated to him, "But Philip, you've seen who the Father is by watching me, by my relationship to Him." And in a sense, He's answering the same question in John

13–16 about the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit,” He says, “you know Him because He’s been with you and He will be in you.” The Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son, one Spirit had dwelt on Jesus’ life for these thirty-three years. “And now,” says Jesus, “He’s going to come to indwell you. And when He comes to indwell you, what will happen is that your life will become a place, a home, where the Father and the Son will come to dwell.”

It is absolutely extraordinary, amazing, wonderful teaching. You see what this means? Remember yesterday when we were talking about baptism? Well, we’re called to live the Christian life as those who belong to the family of God. We’ve been named for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—for the Trinity. That’s our new family name. But it’s not just a formal thing. It’s an amazing, glorious reality in which, by the indwelling of the Spirit, not only does the Spirit indwell us, but through the Spirit, both the Father and the Son come, as Jesus says, to make our lives their home.

I don’t think there’s anything more practical than knowing that that’s true of you. Many years ago, J.B. Phillips, famous for his paraphrase of the New Testament, wrote a little book with the title, *Your God Is Too Small*. It’s not really about the Trinity, but I think those words do apply to our appreciation of the Trinity, because if we’ve thought about the Trinity as a speculative and impractical doctrine, then our God is too small. And that means it’s time for us to think again, and we’ll think again about the Trinity for the last time this week tomorrow.

[Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost - Sinclair Ferguson](#)

The New Testament regularly describes our redemption in Trinitarian terms. Today, Sinclair Ferguson shows that knowing the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in salvation can enrich our worship of the triune God.

The Christian life is Trinity shaped. That’s been our theme all this week on Things Unseen. I wonder if you’ve ever seen those puzzle pictures where you’re told there are twelve things hidden in the picture and you must try to find them? For some cognitive reason, we seem to vary a great deal in our ability to spot things like that. But what I used to find when I did those puzzles was that it might take me a minute or two to spot one, or perhaps two, and then for some reason, probably related to the way our perception works individually, I would see another and another and another quite quickly. And then things would slow down before I might or might not spot the last one or two.

I think spotting the Trinity in the pages of the New Testament is a bit like that. And I rather suspect that there are some Christians who faithfully read the New Testament but hardly ever think about the Trinity, but then someone says: “Do you see that? Look at this passage. It’s about the Trinity. Do you see the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit here?” And you spot a reference or two, and then somehow you get it. And then you start finding references to the Father and the Son and the Spirit all over the place, and then you begin to see that the Father and the Son and the Spirit—one God—are present everywhere you look, even when they’re not mentioned like that.

I think of one example. Galatians 4:4 is a great Christmas text. It’s about the coming of Christ: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under a law, so that eventually we might receive adoption as sons.” That’s a Christmas text, but it’s actually also about the Father. It’s the Father who sent the Son. And Paul goes on to say that when we receive the adoption as sons, the Spirit

comes into our hearts, the Spirit of the Son, crying, “Abba! Father!” In other words, he’s saying, for us to be conscious of what it means to have God as our Father in Jesus Christ—God as the Father who sent His Son into the world for our salvation—the Spirit also has to minister in our hearts to give us such a consciousness of His fatherly love that we call out, “Abba! Father!” So, there’s a text about Christmas that has actually got to do with Trinity.

The Apostle Paul works this out in some detail in Romans 8. Now, I know that may be one of your favorite chapters, perhaps your most favorite chapter in the Bible, but I wonder if you’ve ever noticed that it’s actually full of references to the Trinity? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit weave their way into almost everything he says. Nor is it just Paul, the great theologian, who teaches us this. It’s also the man who had the fishing business in Galilee and perhaps only a synagogue-school-level education. I mean, Simon Peter.

Have you ever noticed how his first letter begins? It’s rooted in the Trinity: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” No wonder he adds, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you,” because when the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—engage together for your salvation, then indeed grace and peace are multiplied to you.

I value a work written somewhere over 350 years ago by the great Puritan theologian John Owen. It has a rather quaint title, I think because it didn’t have a contents page, actually. It’s this: *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (Each Person Distinctly) in Love, Grace, and Consolation: Or, the Saints Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Unfolded*. John Owen’s thesis is actually very simple, but it’s wonderfully profound. He argues that since each person in the Trinity has a particular role in the work of God, the work they all do together, we can worship the one God with respect to what each person does. So we praise God the Trinity for saving us, but we especially praise the Father for planning and sending the Lord Jesus. We praise the Son for coming and dying and rising. We praise the Spirit for revealing and indwelling, and so on and on.

And I think we instinctively understand this. You may have a new assistant minister who comes, and he leads in prayer in a service, and he’s a little nervous. He begins his prayer by addressing the Father, and within about thirty seconds he’s thanking the Father for coming and dying for us on the cross. He’s just got a little confused. We don’t accuse him of the early church heresy of patripassianism, believing it was the Father that died on the cross. But we realize he’s confused because we know the Father didn’t die for us on the cross, only the Son did. And what Owen is saying is, therefore, it’s the Son we thank for dying on the cross, and actually we don’t thank the Father for doing that, but we do thank Him for sending His Son to die on the cross. And when you think about the various operations of the Holy Spirit in that way, what happens is that your sense of wonder and appreciation of who God is as Trinity and what He has done in this marvelous Trinitarian conspiracy to bring us salvation fills your heart with joy and love and adoration and praise, and your fellowship with God is therefore wonderfully enhanced.

So, maybe we should end this week when we’ve been thinking about the Trinity with the words of the doxology: Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heav’nly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.