

A Message from Godfrey

Trinity Sunday

The doctrine of the Trinity is basic to the Christian faith. It is crucial for properly understanding what God is like, how He relates to us, and how we should relate to Him. But it also raises many difficult questions. How can God be both one and three? Is the Trinity a contradiction? If Jesus is God, why do the Gospels record instances where He prayed to God?

While we cannot fully understand everything about the Trinity (or anything else), it is possible to answer questions like these and come to a solid grasp of what it means for God to be three in one.

The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three in person. These definitions express three crucial truths: (1) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, (2) each Person is fully God, (3) there is only one God.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons. The Bible speaks of the Father as God, Jesus as God and the Holy Spirit as God. Are these just three different ways of looking at God, or simply ways of referring to three different roles that God plays?

In the baptism of Jesus, we see the Father speaking from heaven and the Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove as Jesus comes out of the water. The fact that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons means, in other words, that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Jesus is God, but He is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, but He is not the Son or the Father. They are different Persons, not three different ways of looking at God.

And so we have the complicated doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Most clergy will volunteer to preach on any subject except on Trinity Sunday. I have heard of clergy booking holidays to avoid it. I once preached a children's service on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It involved four glass bowls. One contained blue coloured water, the second had red coloured and the third was clear. I then poured the blue, red and clear water into a bowl and asked the children to tell me which part of the water had once been blue, red or clear. Of course they could not thus demonstrating the Oneness of the Holy Spirit, Three persons one God.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has not just been a problem for the church today but has existed since the days of the early church.

In order to begin to unravel this complex piece of theology we need to go back to the Early Church.

The Council of Nicea took place in AD 325 by order of the Roman Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine. Nicea was located in Asia Minor, east of Constantinople. At the Council of Nicea, Emperor Constantine presided over a group of church bishops and other leaders with the purpose of defining the nature of God for all of Christianity and eliminating confusion, controversy, and contention within the church. The Council of Nicea overwhelmingly affirmed the deity and eternal nature of Jesus Christ and defined the relationship between the Father and the Son as "of one substance." It also affirmed the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were listed as three co-equal and co-eternal Persons.

Constantine, who claimed conversion to Christianity, called for a meeting of bishops to be held in Nicea to resolve some controversies among the church leaders. The issues being debated included the nature of Jesus Christ, the proper date to celebrate Easter, and other matters. The failing Roman Empire, now under Constantine's rule, could not withstand the division caused by years

of hard-fought, “out of hand” arguing over doctrinal differences. The emperor saw the quarrels within the church not only as a threat to Christianity but as a threat to society as well. Therefore, at the Council of Nicea, Constantine encouraged the church leaders to settle their internal disagreements and become Christ-like agents who could bring new life to a troubled empire. Constantine felt “called” to use his authority to help bring about unity, peace, and love within the church. It could be argued that Constantine’s “conversion to Christianity was more political expediency as opposed to a leap of faith.

The main theological issue had always been about Christ. Since the end of the apostolic age, Christians had begun debating these questions: Who is the Christ? Is He more divine than human or more human than divine? Was Jesus created or begotten? Being the Son of God, is He co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, or is He lower in status than the Father? Is the Father the one true God, or are the Father, Son, and Spirit the one true God?

A priest named Arius presented his argument that Jesus Christ was not an eternal being, that He was created at a certain point in time by the Father. Bishops such as Alexander and the deacon Athanasius argued the opposite position: that Jesus Christ is eternal, just like the Father is.

Constantine prodded the 300 bishops in the council make a decision by majority vote defining who Jesus Christ is. The statement of doctrine they produced was one that all of Christianity would follow and obey, called the “Nicene Creed.” This creed was upheld by the church and enforced by the Emperor and will be recited by us this morning as it has since the days of Constantine. The bishops at Nicea voted to make the full deity of Christ the accepted position of the church. The Council of Nicea upheld the doctrine of Christ’s true divinity, rejecting Arius’s heresy. The council did not invent this doctrine. Rather, it only recognized what the Bible already taught.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus the Messiah should be worshipped, which is to say He is co-equal with God. The New Testament forbids the

Paul, in Romans says, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.¹¹ The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.¹³ For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

John’s Gospel declares Jesus to be the divine, eternal Logos, the agent of creation and source of life and light the "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" ([John 14:6](#)); our advocate with the Father ([1 John 2:1-2](#)); the Sovereign ([Revelation 1:5](#)); and the Son of God from the beginning to the end ([Revelation 22:13](#)). The author of Hebrews reveals the deity of Jesus through His perfection as the most high priest ([Hebrews 1](#); [Hebrews 7:1-3](#)). The divine-human Saviour is the Christian’s object of faith, hope, and love.

The Council of Nicea did not invent the doctrine of the deity of Christ. Rather, the Council of Nicea affirmed the apostles’ teaching of who Jesus Christ is—the one true God and the Second Person of the Trinity, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.