

The Trinity

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[0:00] Well, let me add my welcome to Nathan's first. My name is Steve, if you don't know me. I am the pastor of the church, one of the church leaders here. And we have, over these last few! Sunday evenings, been thinking about some big doctrinal questions and how they are answered, or have been answered in history, specifically by the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. Now, if this is your first time here on Sunday evening, you might think, wow, I've never heard of something so interesting as that. Or you might be thinking, wow, that sounds terrible. But anyway, hopefully you'll see that actually many of the questions that we wrestle with, which are really pertinent to our day-to-day Christian lives, are not unique to us, but have been wrestled with down through history by Christians in centuries gone by. And last week, we started thinking about, when we say we believe in God, what do we mean by that? What kind of God is it that we believe in? What makes our God different to Allah, or to the multitude of Hindu gods, or to the vague idea of many of our friends who don't really want to write off the idea of God altogether, but still don't really believe in the Bible?

Someone who would be like a deist or a theist, someone who thinks that there is a God who exists, but don't really think much about him. And we saw last week, if you remember, that the distinction between the Christian gods and other gods is that the claim of the Christian is that God speaks. I mean, maybe that's not unique itself, but that God speaks not in a general sense, but so accommodates himself to our understanding that he speaks by, in the person of the Son, putting on human flesh, and arriving in our world that we might know him, and that we might see him in flesh, so that the Son says, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. We saw last week that God isn't just revealing his actions, but his essence in Christ, that while we don't know everything about him, which would be impossible for us, we do know true things about God. Now, I know, right, because there are people both in the church and in my family who tell me that sometimes this is complicated and confusing, right? And so I know that you might be thinking, oh, this is going to be brain stretching again tonight. But let me tell you that thinking big thoughts about God and who he is, is really the very center of Christian discipleship. I think you could probably say, and this wouldn't be far from the truth, I think it would be true and helpful. You might be able to unpick it later. But I think you can say that there is not a problem that you have, or an issue that you face, or a worry that you have that keeps you up at night, which is not solved, or at least resolved in your mind by a bigger view of

God than you have at the moment. You could say, to put it the other way, that Christian growth is the process of God becoming bigger in your mind and understanding, and you becoming smaller. However, as you are humbled and God is glorified, that's how it works. We swap out our self-interest and our self-sufficiency for faith in him. Now, if that's Christian growth, then there is one doctrine that makes you realize more and more that you cannot fully grasp God, which is the doctrine of the Trinity. And that's what we're going to be thinking about together this evening. Our church is a part of a fellowship of churches called the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, and they have a theological committee. And the head of that theological committee, who is a guy that you might not know, says this about the doctrine of the Trinity. He says, if your doctrine of the Trinity is simply understood, it's wrong. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is not simple, and that is our territory this evening. What does it mean for God to be a Trinity? Who are the persons? How do they relate to one another?

[4:13] And what difference does that make? So let's start with the 1689 Baptist Confession, chapter two, paragraph three, which some of you have probably memorized already anyway, but it says this about the Trinity. It's on your handout. This divine and infinite being consists of three real persons, the Father, the Word or Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three have the same substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence without this essence being divided. The Father is not derived from anyone, neither begotten nor proceeding. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. All three are infinite and without beginning, and are therefore only one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being. Yet these three are distinguished by several distinctive characteristics and personal relations. This truth of the Trinity is the foundation of all our fellowship with God and of our comforting dependence on him. Okay, with the person next to you, have a look through the statement and just sort of mark out what it's trying to say about the Trinity, underlying its truths. What is it trying to get us to understand about the Trinity?

Have a go at that. Big ideas, and then we'll feed some back. Okay, sorry to interrupt your conversations.

I'm not going to take feedback on that just because you can ask me those questions in a moment, and I think hopefully some of what you've been discussing will come out in what I've got prepared here. I was going to show you that there are three things about the Trinity here, which I thought would be quite cool, but I think actually it's easier if we see four things instead of three, which is slightly annoying, isn't it? But anyway, here's the first thing that I want to show you that the confession is saying about the Trinity. Firstly, three persons, okay?

There are three real persons, as the confession puts it. So importantly, the father is not the son, and the son is not the spirit, and the spirit is not the father. Or you can put it another way, there is not one God who turns up in three different ways or three different forms. That is an ancient heresy called modalism, the idea that God turns up in different modes. And you might have been taught in RE at school, if you were taught RE at school, that it's like water being like ice and steam.

And yeah, water, ice and steam, right? But it's not like that, is it? Because that's essentially the same thing just appearing in different ways. But there are actually distinct persons who can be talked about independently, and for whom their distinction from one another really is their main distinction, okay? So it is that the father is not the son, is not the spirit, is the main thing about the father. And that the son is not the father and not the spirit is, in a sense, the main thing about the son. Here the confession is echoing the Nicene Creed, one father, one son, one spirit, one God.

[7:56] And that in turn is echoing really things like Matthew 28, when Jesus says, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. Of course, there'd be absolutely no point in saying that, would there?

Unless there were three persons, you would baptize them into the name of God, because there is just one person, right?

But if there are three persons, you would baptize them into the name of the father, the son, and the spirit. Or Mark 1, the same, just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open, and the spirit descending on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, you are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased. Here you have the son in the water, the spirit descending like a dove, and the voice of the father from heaven. Of course, if modalism was true, that would be complete nonsense. Because there wouldn't be distinct persons, but these are three distinct real persons. Now, the individual discernible and distinct three persons are really important, and right at the start of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. But, second thing is, there is only one God. So, three persons and one God. One substance or essence possessed. So, we're told by the confession that these three have the same substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence without this essence being divided. This is really important, and it's really carefully worded, okay? The divine essence isn't divided up a third, a third, a third, so that the son has a third of the divine essence, the father has a third, and the spirit has a third, and when they get together, it's the magical, you know, they're all the divine essence. No, the son possesses the

fullness of divine essence, the father possesses the fullness of divine essence, and the spirit is also fully God. So, to meet the son is to meet God. To be indwelt by the spirit is to be indwelt by God himself. Now, that means that the other thing that you were taught at Aria at school, not just water, ice, and steam, but the three-leaf clover thing is also not true, right?

Because a three-leaf clover is, you know, you pull a leaf away, and you've got less than it, haven't you? It's a third, a third, a third. But one person is the whole divinity. To worship the son is to worship God. To pray to the father is to speak to God. Now, notice that the son is eternally begotten of the father. Now, what does begotten mean? It means that there is not a time when the son was not. He is not made by the father, in that sense. He is begotten by the father. He is from the father. He is the son of the father, but it is an eternal begottenness, and so that there isn't a beginning to the son, he is eternal and sharing in the divine essence with the father. So here again, the confession, along with the Nicene Creed, condemns Arianism, where a guy called Arius denied the full deity of the son, saying that, you know, the son is created by the father and therefore less than God, so he is not a possessor of the full divine essence. That, of course, is now the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses, isn't it? But it's wrong. Why is it wrong? Well, it means, doesn't it, if Jesus is not eternally begotten of the father, and if he is not the possessor of full divine essence, if the person of the son in his divinity is not fully God, if he's less than God, then it means, doesn't it, that worshipping Jesus is kind of idolatrous, because you're worshipping someone who is less than divine, and the gospels are full of the worship of Jesus. The disciples at the end of the gospels, bless you, end up worshipping Jesus. Or if the son is less than fully God, and is somehow sort of independent from the Godhead on a sort of slightly lower echelon than God himself, the father or whatever, then that would mean that the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross is somehow God taking out a vendetta on an innocent third party in order to make himself feel better about his anger against sin, which of course is a terrible heresy. It would be a wicked thing for God to be. And the New Testament teaches us that Christ on the cross is God satisfying himself for our sin, presenting himself to himself to satisfy himself. And if Jesus, one last thing, if Jesus was less than fully divine, less than a possessor of the divine essence in human flesh, it would mean that anything that you learnt about God from the son would not be quite right.

Yeah. So when Jesus says, if you've seen me, you've seen God, you've seen the father, but he's not really a possessor of the divine essence. He is, he's made by the father, he's made less than God himself. Then what you learn about God from seeing the Lord Jesus is really not quite right, because you're seeing someone who's not quite there, who's not quite divine. But of course, when God comes in human flesh, when the person of the son takes on human flesh, and arrives, he is revealing God to us, so that he can say, if you've seen me, you've seen the father, he can say that the word has become flesh, he can say that you can know God through knowing him. This is how God reveals himself. It's perhaps, I think, helpful to think, because we end up interacting with people who often think that Jesus is less than divine, don't we? So that's what the Jehovah's Witnesses believe. Obviously, that's what Muslims would believe about Jesus as well. It's important,

I think, though, particularly with Jehovah's Witnesses, who would claim to be Christians, especially when they talk to you on the street, or knock on your door, to say to them, listen, you can't be a Christian, because you don't believe about Jesus what Christians have always believed about him, which is that he is fully divine. And for you to change what Christians have believed about Jesus for 2,000 years, and still to think you carry the badge, well, you're deluded. That's not a minor change, that is a massive change. Because there are three persons, but there is only one God, and each of those three persons are full possessors of the divine essence, so they are fully God. Okay, next, it's worth noticing that the confession spells out that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. So we thought a bit about the begottenness of the Son, eternally begotten, not made. It's now worth noticing we are told that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Now, do you know the controversy between the Eastern and Western Church? So you end up with the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Roman Church, which then splits with the Protestant Reformation, is the battle between Rome and Constantinople. So Rome, the seat of the Roman Church, and Constantinople, the head of the Eastern Church. They got together for the Council of Nicaea, and they agreed that the Spirit proceeded from the Father. And later the Roman Church added, probably under the influence of Augustine, that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. [15:40] Interesting, I don't really know enough of the history. You can perhaps find it out and let me know. But I'm not sure how much the

disagreement was theological as it was political. The Eastern Church was annoyed that the Roman Church had added to the Creed without having another Council.

But anyway, they split off over this, and so the Eastern and Western Church went one way, and the other one went the other way. But here, the Confession picks up this idea from the Creed, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. That God the Son, in human flesh, returns to the Father, requesting that the Spirit be sent to His people, that they might continue His ministry. And so the Father and the Son send the Spirit, which is what happens at Pentecost. Now, that points to this idea of what we call the roles of the Trinity, or the economy of the Trinity.

Just nod if you're still with me. Yeah? Okay, great. So, three persons, one God, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Son eternally begotten of the Father.

Now, the roles of the Trinity. So, although there is one God, and the persons of the Trinity indwell one another, still, in the way that God reveals Himself, the persons do different things.

[17:04] So, it is the Son, not the Father, who takes on human flesh, and arrives in this world to die on the cross. And it's the Father who sends the Son, not the Son who sends the Father.

It's the Father who is not derived from anyone, neither begotten nor proceeding, as the Confession puts it. The Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds. Now, the way that this has been distinguished is in language like this, the distinction between the imminent Trinity, or sometimes called the ontological Trinity, and the economic Trinity.

Now, don't be afraid of those words, okay? Words aren't scary, right? The imminent Trinity, or ontological Trinity, that means God as He really is.

Okay? That in His eternal relations, what God is really like. And the economic Trinity is how we experience Him through His actions, okay?

Now, in a way, that distinction, in some senses, is a false distinction. It's one to help us think, rather than one that actually exists in reality, in a sense.

[18:13] Because the economic Trinity reveals real things about the imminent Trinity. So we do see who He really is through how He works. But it's important, isn't it, to notice how He works, because they're not quite the same thing.

And so we see this in the way that Jesus speaks about His Father telling Him what to do, that He is obeying the will of the Father, in a way that the Father doesn't obey the will of the Son.

But the will of the Father is the will of God, and Jesus is part of the Godhead, yeah? And is fully God. So there is a distinction between the imminent Trinity and the economic Trinity.

But they are very close together, yeah? Does that make sense? Yeah? We're all nodding. Can I say it again? Which bit?

That bit. That bit. I can't read from that far away. Oh my goodness. I'm 50 years old, don't you know? Yeah, that's right.

[19:19] Okay, I'm 12, when I want to be. So, the idea is that God, in His eternal relations, we haven't known God in His eternal relations, yeah?

Because we have not been there. You and I, we're not in eternity past. Some of us are old, but we're not that old, right? God has been relating in eternity past as Father, Son, and Spirit, yeah? We know God from His revelation of Himself and see Him in His actions, yeah? And so, we get to speak about the economy of the Trinity, which is how we see Him working in time and space and history.

So, in time and space and history, the Father sends the Son. The Son takes on human flesh. The Son is indwelt by the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit to do remarkable things for the glory of God.

In the end, dying on a cross and rising again for our salvation. And so, what we need to say, we need to be careful about that distinction, because we don't fully understand everything about God, yeah?

[20:27] But we do see how He works, and that's revealed to us in the Scriptures. But we need to retain this idea that the eternal relations of the Trinity are somewhat, in some senses, revealed in part, but not in full.

Okay? I'm not going to say that. Right, because that would be even more confusing. I want you, with the person next to you, or persons next to you, just to have a think about some of those things. Why is understanding the Trinity important in the Christian life? Say, why is it important that we understand that there are three persons, one God, that the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit is proceeding from the Father and the Son, and that there's a distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity?

Why is that important? What difference does it make? Is it possible to be a Christian and just ignore all of this? Have a think with the person next to you about that, and then we'll feed back. Thank you. Thank you.

[22:00] Go on, Matthews. We discussed quite a bit. So... I can imagine. You're sat next to my dad.

Yeah. Yeah. So... So we did... The first thing we discussed was... And the question was, why is it important to understand the Trinity?

Yeah. And then we spoke... We mentioned the Old Testament. So when they... When they built in the tent for God to come and go in, and there was...

Aaron's sons got... Aaron's sons got... Yeah. So you had to be... Yeah. So then... Because this is what I said.

This is something that Shavu... Yeah. So... The first thing... The importance is... Only God can... Only... For God to dwell inside of you...

[22:55] Only He can make it... Can make... Your body a temple for His dwelling. So I thought... I had to understand... Jesus being sacrificed for you... You know that...

Believing in Him... And once you believe in Him... You believe in the words He says... And once you believe in the words He says... He can... Allow the Holy Spirit to come and go in and do the work.

Yeah. Yeah. Wow.

There's quite a lot there, isn't there? So just about... In terms of... The... I... I need Jesus... To... To be fully divine. It's alright, Liz.

No one's noticed. I need Jesus to be fully divine. So that the righteousness that He might give me... Might be sufficient for then the Spirit to dwell in me. Yeah. Yeah?

So because... Because if His righteousness is not... Full righteousness... Then I will not be... Able to be in His presence. Yeah. That's really helpful. Yeah, yeah.

[23:52] Yeah, that's great. Yeah. We were saying that... It's important... Because... It's good for us to know...

What different roles... The Trinity has. Because as you see... The Spirit... Brings us and sanctifies us. And Jesus... Saying that to the Father... Yeah.

Yeah. I don't know. I don't know. Not saying... But as we do that... We also... Realise... That is something that we do.

Yeah. Like... It helps us to remember that... They are all working... Yeah. For us. Save us. Yeah.

We just trust Him. Yeah. That's... Yeah. Yeah.

So it just helps underline this idea... That it is all God's work. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I suppose... I mean there's two... You've got... God has been communal...

[24:46] It's like a role model for us... Our relationships... But then you've got Jesus being a role model for us... Our relationship... To the Godhead. To the Godhead. Yeah. So you keep having this...

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. No thanks Mike. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So it's useful to know who you're talking to...

And why you're talking to them... Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. Speak to the Father... Through the Son... In the power of the Spirit... Yeah. We can pray to Jesus as well. You're right. That is... There is an instance of that in the Bible.

Let me just pull out a few things... And then we'll finish with this. The first thing I just want to say... Is that really... It's only when you begin to understand the Trinity... That you really can understand the world in which we live.

[25:43] Right? It's only this God that explains the world. Right? Perhaps the greatest thing in the world... I mean obviously other than God... Is love, isn't it?

Love is what we treasure most. Yeah? Love motivates our greatest actions. It's the heart of every good story. But if God was not a triune God... He would be incapable of creating a world of love. Right? It's because God has been in a loving Trinitarian relationship... Between Father, Son and Spirit... That he is able to make a world of love.

Right? That the sort of monotheistic Allah... Is incapable of creating the world you experience. And that is why he is not the true God.

You see it in lots of other ways, don't you? That the diversity in our world... That is gloriously united together... This distinct from one another...

[26:41] But inseparable from one another... Is all over our world, isn't it? Night and day. Land and sea. Husband and wife. It is the Trinitarian... Distinct but inseparable.

But I think perhaps the most important application... Is spelt out for us by Jesus... In his high priestly prayer in John 17. And this picks up some of the things... That have been already mentioned.

Let me just read this to you... And we'll work through just a few things here. Jesus praying to his Father. An inter-Trinitarian conversation. Jesus in his humanity.

Linked to his divinity in the one person... The Son. In the power of the Spirit. Speaks to his Father. My prayer, he says... Is not for them alone. That means not just the disciples.

I pray also... For those who will believe in me... Through their message. That's you and me this evening. That all of them may be one, Father... Just as you are in me...

[27:40] And I am in you. May they also be in us... So that the world may believe... That you have sent me. I have given them glory. The glory that you gave me.

That they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. So that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know...

That you have sent me and loved them... Even as you have loved me. Father... I want those you have given me... To be with me where I am.

And to see my glory. The glory you have given me... Because you loved me... Before the creation of the world. Righteous Father...

Though the world does not know you... I know you... And they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them... And will continue to make you known... In order...

[28:34] That the love you have for me... May be in them... And that I myself... Might be in them. Now Jesus is praying...

Here isn't he? That we might be one with each other. Verse 21. Right at the beginning. In the same way that God is in the Son... And the Son is in the Father. In other words...

He wants the riches of our human relationships... In the church... To be like the relations of the Trinity. So that we together... So that we together... Will know the unity...

Or oneness... That God knows... In his Trinitarian-ness. And that oneness... At the end of verse 21... Will then show the world...

Who Jesus is. Who is this God... That takes these people... From all these different places... With all these different backgrounds... From all these different ethnicities...

[29:29] All these different ages... All these different backgrounds... And he unites them together... With a love... And a bond. What kind of God does that? A Trinitarian God does that.

But there's more to it... Even than that isn't there? In verse 21 and 23... It's not only that we might... Sorry in 22 and 23... It's not only that we might be... One with each other... But... Blow your mind... We might be one with God.

That the Son... By the Spirit... Might dwell in us... In the same way... That the Father dwells in the Son... So that we are in complete unity...

With each other... And with God himself... Now... That's incredible isn't it? Look down at verse 24... Why is this so good? Jesus wants us to be with him...

Because he wants us to see his glory... Verse 24... That was given to him... In the eternal love of the Father... For the Son... See... This is why this is so important... Isn't it? The doctrine of the Trinity...

[30:28] Is because Christian... You are invited... You are invited... Into the relationships of the Trinity... That... That is our hope... That

is our... Destination...

This is the eternal family... Into which we have been adopted... To know and begin to grapple with... And understand the doctrine of the Trinity... Is to get to know...

The family into which we have been adopted... And will spend eternity... These perfect... Deeply satisfying... Oneness relationships... Will be ours...

Forever... And ever... And ever... So that the Father is not the Son... But loves the Son... Matters to me... Because... That love...

Will be the love that... We get to share... I get to share... Now... And eternally... So look at verse 25... And 26 again... Notice that this enjoyment of the Trinity...

[31:22] Starts now... As we get to know God... Righteous Father... Though the world does not know you... I know you... And they know that you have sent me... I have made you known to them...

And will continue to make you known... In order that the love that you have for me... May be in them... And I myself may be in them... In other words... It's as we get to know...

The Father... Through the Son... By the Spirit... That we get to be in Him... And enjoy Him... Right? So...

This is... I mean... This is utterly mind-blowing... Isn't it? Right? So that... It is... As I begin to grapple with... And understand the Trinity... That I am seeing where I'm going...

And seeing what God has called me to... This relationship of eternal and perfect love... Will be what we enjoy for all eternity... I don't know whether you think that heaven's going to be really boring...

[32:21] Right? It is... I mean... It is definitely not going to be boring... It will be... Perfect... Relationally perfect... Between all of those who are there... As we share in these eternal relations of the Trinity...

And delight in Him... In a world remade by His power and His glory forever and ever and ever... The best bit... About... Heaven... Is that...

Is this bit... Right? That we're with... Our God... Our Father, Son and Spirit... And dwelling with Him... And Him in us... And us in Him...

Forever and ever and ever... Amen... Amen... Amen... Great... Let me close in prayer... Let's... Loving Heavenly Father...

It is just... Utterly... Mind-bendingly brilliant... That this eternal loving relationship...

[33:20] That you have enjoyed... With your Son... And the Spirit... Would be... Made available to us... Through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ...

That sinful... Broken... Weak people like us... Would be so transformed by Christ's work... That we would be invited to join in the perfect relations of the Trinity...

For all eternity... For our joy... And for your glory... Forever and ever... Our minds cannot even begin to scratch the surface of the wonder and the brilliance of that...

And so we just praise you... And we say... Heavenly Father... Please... We pray... Come... And send your Son... The Lord Jesus... That we might be with you... Lord...

We... We want to get to know you better... And we... We don't understand you fully... We could never even... Begin to... Or claim to... But we want to know you truly...

[34:18] And we want to use the best of our brains... To understand you as much as we can... So that we might glorify you as much as it's possible for us to do so... Because we... We long...

That others may see... The wonder and the brilliance... And the glory of your name... As we live for your glory... In Christ's name... Amen... Amen...

To understand... To understand...