



The Trinity | Is God Confusing?

Is God confusing? We're looking at, in the words of Clint Eastwood, "the one God, three Gods thing." If you've ever tried to explain the Trinity, you know it seems like a contradiction. Should we just chalk it up to mystery and, as the priest said, take it by faith, blindly sliding the doctrine onto the shelf of our mental library? If you're skeptical, I invite you to query the Trinity this morning. If you're a believer, don't take the Trinity on blind faith. Work at it. Here's why: "[People who seek God, and stretch their minds as far as human weakness is able to, toward an understanding of the trinity, must surely experience the strain of trying to fix their gaze on light inaccessible, and the difficulties presented by the holy scriptures...to wear Adam down and let Christ's glorious grace shine through.](#)" Let's think on the Trinity to wear Adam down, but create a window for Christ's glorious grace to pour through us.

Personal, Loving Community

God is **three persons** not three gods. We know this because Scripture assigns each person of the Godhead a personal name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity appears together in important moments in redemptive history. For instance, in Jesus' Great Commission of the disciples: "[Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,](#)" (Matt 28:19). Three persons, three names, with each of them *acting* like three distinct persons. They speak, act, and love. Love is of particular importance. Love is distinctly personal, and God is **love** (1 John 4:8). How? Jesus describes his relationship with the Father as one based on love: "[Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world](#)" (Jn 17:24). The Father loves the Son. They are persons in relationship. Notice their love isn't based on performance or conditional. They have always loved one another, "from before the foundation of the world," before the Son obeyed or suffered, the Father loved him. Before the Father lifted a finger to create, the Son loved him. Divine, personal love. This is the basis of Christian love. Everyone loves this idea—God as love/divine love—but we have difficult time applying it. Most of us settle for **human love**. Human love loves for its own sake. It is conditional. I love if I will be loved back. Human love is based on reciprocity. I love you, if you will love me. If we are not loved in return we become embittered, angry, cynical, or withdraw. This is true in all relationships. If a friend isn't pursuing you enough, you may begin to inwardly judge, complain, and eventually withdraw. I did this intensely my second year of marriage. I wanted my wife to open up, to share more deeply with me, but she couldn't. So I did what any normal person would do—I got angry and ripped my T-shirts. Human love actually demands things of others. It is bent; it curves in on itself. Divine, Trinitarian love is *different*. It is not conditional. How? It's not just that God is perfect; it's because God trinity. Three persons. Have you ever noticed how a friendship can get better when you add a third person? It can get worse, but it gets better when the third person acts as a mediator, an agent to keep the conversation going, supply a third perspective. She pulls something out of her friends that they couldn't pull out of one another. She *mediates* better friendship. I've seen this in Fight Club relationships, small



communities we help one another rejoice in Christ, repent of sin, and reproduce disciples. One on one can bog down, but three can keep up urgency to fight, create better counsel, and encourage one another in faith. In a way, this is also true of the Trinity. Divine love works, in a sense, because it is a *community* of love. It isn't just the Father loving the Son. It is the Father loving the Son *through the Spirit*. The relationship is completed by the Spirit. The Spirit mediates love: "[God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit](#)" (Rom 5:5). The fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal 5:23). The Spirit isn't, as the priest said, "an expression of God's love," *but a divine person who is love*. In words of Augustine, the Trinity is: Lover (Father) → Love (Spirit) → Beloved (Son). Now, what happens if you exchange human love for divine love, Trinitarian love? Your relationships can transform. Here's how. You no longer have to love based on reciprocity because a third "person" has entered the relationship. It is no longer you and your friend, you and your spouse. It is us, and God mediates our love. So if there are unmet needs in your friendship or marriage, you don't have to demand things of others (human love) because you are freed to find perfect, complete love in the Trinity. **Wives**, you don't have to withdraw or demand your husband love you in a certain way because you're so well loved by the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit. God has poured his love into your heart thru the Spirit. **Husbands**, you don't have to cower under your wife's demands. God's love frees you to lead her, risking mistakes, because you are so well loved and approved by the Trinity. **Singles**, you don't have to look for love in others, especially in non-Christians, because you are loved by the Father, Son, and Spirit. See, now Christ's glorious grace can shine through you...in the way you interact with others. You can be patient and forbearing **because another Person has entered the relationship**. His name is *Love*. So, the Trinity is not an abstract concept, but a personal, loving community.

One God

God is not only a loving community, but also a divine Being. He is **one God**, three persons but one God. Getting back to Jesus words in John 17, he asks that his people "[may be one even as we are one](#)." This tells us that the three persons are actually *one*. This is the great Shema of the Old Testament, "[The Lord our God, the Lord is one](#)" (Deut 6:4), which is expanded by Paul to include Jesus (2 Cor 8:6).¹ The point of the Bible is that each person is God. They are one God, three persons. Now, this is where the Trinity gets confusing. One and three? So we try to relieve this confusion through analogies. You may have heard the Trinity compared to water: one substance with three forms (ice, liquid, gas), right? Wrong. This is actually a heresy. God isn't a substance that appears in three different forms, sometimes as father, or son, or spirit. He is three distinct persons that simultaneously exist. Water can't simultaneously exist in three forms. Or there's the three-leaf clover analogy.

¹ We see their oneness in the Trinitarian benedictions and greetings throughout Scripture (2 Cor 13:14; 1 Pet 1; Eph 4:4-6; Jude 20-21). But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

One clover, three leaves. This is also incorrect. The persons of the Trinity are not “three parts or thirds” to God. Each person is fully God. So how do we explain the Trinity? One is three? Isn’t it a contradiction? It doesn’t add up, which is correct, *if* we are doing Math. But we are doing *theology*. **We are not counting up persons to determine the number of gods. We are considering God to determine the nature of being.** This isn’t mathematics; it’s theology. The threeness of God is a distinctly Christian teaching. God is not, at his essence, a substance, an emotion, an energy. God is—essentially—three, divine, persons in relationship. That’s who God is. Persons in Community. It should baffle, bring out wonder. After all, this is God. And the more we study, reflect and talk to him through the Trinity the more our wonder should increase. As we do, we’ll see that this conception of God, as Trinity, makes better sense of the world than any other religion. The Trinity (three persons in relationship) makes sense of our longing to be in relationship and to give and receive love. The God of Islam cant provide a basis for love. Allah is not a loving community, nor can he truly love because he is a monad—one—not a trinity. Love requires an object, a person to whom our affection, sacrifice, and attention flows. Allah has no one to love from before the foundations of the world. You can add the Eastern religions (Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism) to this list. They don’t even conceive of God as personal, much less a basis for love. But the Trinity is a whirlwind of love! A community of interrelating, loving, divine persons. Now, its one thing to affirm this doctrine but its quite another **to get inside of it, to live in him.** After college I took a nosedive into theology. I moved to Minneapolis to study under a great theologian. I carried a book everywhere I went. Then I got married to my wonderful wife, Robie. Poor thing. Being the hospitable woman she is, we regularly had people join us for lunch or dinner. But there was a problem. Some of them were boring. So I always had a back up companion with me—a book. I actually brought a book to the dinner table, where I would keep it in balanced and open on my lap, so if the conversation got boring, I could discreetly look down and begin to read. I was a terrible conversationalist. I abhorred shallow conversation. I knew one pace, deep or nothing. I am a natural introvert, have a tendency to withdraw from groups, and used to be terrible at asking people questions, getting into their lives. But then I was struck with this thought: If God is trinity, and I am made in his image (Gen 1:26), then I am made for the community, and to be for the community, I must know them, and to know them, I must ask questions. I was seized by the communal nature of God as a basis for cultivating relationships. I was floored by God’s patience with me as I dismissed people in favor of books. Seeing God as a loving community changed me. I stopped bringing books to the table. I began to value people for more than what they *know* or what they can *give* but simply because they are. I knew I needed help, so I read a book on how to cultivate relationships. I began asking questions in conversation, instead of waiting for people to ask me questions. I tried to love others. On a visit to see us in Minneapolis, my Dad even commented: “Hey, where are your books? Aren’t you bringing them to the table?” I explained that I had been convicted of self/human-love and that understanding God as a loving community of persons was slowly changing me. The Trinity changes things, if you can get inside the Trinity. The only way into the Trinity is through the Son. Jesus said: “**And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him**” (Jn 14:21). Love Jesus and you will know the love of the Father and the Spirit. Insist on being loved by others and you will distance yourself from the love of the



Trinity. Turn to Christ, and God's love will be *poured out, lavished, splashing out of your heart*, through the Holy Spirit. Draw near to the Trinity, to wear Adam down, and allow Christ's glorious grace to shine through.