

Trinity

1. What is the Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity is a central Christian teaching about the nature of God that states he is like a shamrock (i.e. a species of clover used as a national symbol of Ireland). A shamrock is a single plant almost entirely comprised of three distinct leaves. For Christians like Saint Patrick (who, according to legend, popularised the use of the shamrock as a symbol for the Trinity), this is just like God: one leaf symbolises God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, who is responsible for the creation and sustenance of the universe. Another leaf symbolises God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, who is responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin. The last leaf represents God the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who is responsible for sustaining Christians and the Church. All persons of the Trinity are coequal (i.e. of equal importance and status), coeternal (i.e. of equal, never-ending age) and consubstantial (i.e. made up of the same divine substance). However, despite their coequality, coeternity and consubstantiality, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are distinct entities.

Trinity

The three persons who form the one God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

2. How does the Trinity work?



A shamrock: an analogy for the Trinity and a national symbol of Ireland.

The doctrine of the Trinity is never explicitly articulated in the New Testament; however, between 100-400, it became a central teaching that almost all Christians accept today. (It is interesting to note that a small number of churches reject the doctrine of the Trinity; their members are known as nontrinitarian Christians and are sometimes labelled as heretics by mainstream, trinitarian Christians.) Notwithstanding the lack of explicit references to the Trinity in the Bible, several passages appear to imply its existence. Some of the most famous verses that trinitarian Christians use to support their doctrine are found in the letters of Paul the Apostle, and the gospels of both Matthew the Apostle and John the Evangelist (i.e. the early Christians to whom two of the gospels are traditionally attributed).

The Pauline epistles: in Philippians 2, Paul the Apostle writes that "Christ Jesus... though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness." This passage appears to reveal that Paul the Apostle thought Jesus was God the Son: he boldly asserted the belief that Jesus existed in the form of God and later suggested "being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death". The person to whom Jesus was obedient is not stated at this point; however, given the context, trinitarian Christians think it is reasonable to assume that Paul the Apostle had the person of God the Father in mind.

The Gospel of Matthew: Matthew the Apostle wrote that "when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."" This scene from Matthew 3 may be the first reported sighting of the Trinity in the New Testament. The person of God the Holy Spirit is clearly identifiable descending like a dove; the person of God the Father appears to be heard in the voice from heaven; and, similarly, the person of God the Son appears to be identified as Jesus with the famous words, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

The Gospel of John: John the Evangelist used trinitarian statements in John 10, where he recorded Jesus saying "the Father and I are one", and John 14, where he wrote, "No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In both these passages, Jesus explicitly claims to be connected with God the Father. Similarly, in John 14, the Holy Spirit is referenced with Jesus's words, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

3. Why is the Trinity important?

In order to be a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian, accepting the doctrine of the Trinity is required. Likewise, the vast majority of Protestant Christians profess that God is one in three persons as well. Although it is possible to be a nontrinitarian or antitrinitarian Christian, as far as the rest of the religion is concerned, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity is a heresy. Beyond this, the Trinity is important because it allows Christians to make sense of the sometimes contradictory nature of God. The conceptual framework of trinitarianism helps Christians visualise God's omnipotence and omniscience in the person of God the Father, who is often represented as a wise and bearded ruler. Likewise, Christians picture God's benevolent and personal nature in the person of God the Son, who is movingly represented with the wounds he suffered during his self-sacrifice on the cross and in clearly human, personal form. Finally, Christians imagine God's immanence in the person of God the Holy Spirit, who is frequently depicted in Christian art as a dove that radiates light throughout the universe.



The Shield of the Trinity: a diagram that explains the Trinity.

George Thinks

So, after all that, what's the doctrine of the Trinity really about? It's perfectly possible that you're none the wiser; it is, after all, a pretty tricky concept for anyone to wrap their heads around (including the minority of nontrinitarian Christians who reject it). The important thing to remember is this: the doctrine of the Trinity is the teaching that even though God's one and Christianity is monotheistic, the one God exists in three distinct persons; just think about the shamrock. Beyond this, knowing that the Trinity is never explicitly written about in the New Testament is helpful. Still, there are enough references for most Christians to think it accurately describes the nature of God, and one of the reasons for this is that the doctrine of the Trinity helps to make sense of some of God's apparently contradictory features. For Christians, he is both benevolent and the judge, immanent and transcendent, and omniscient but also the giver of free will. For pretty obvious reasons, the belief that God's all-loving is difficult to square with the idea that he's responsible for judging people when they die and sending them to an eternity in either heaven or hell. Likewise, how can God be beyond the universe and, therefore, responsible for its creation whilst, at the same time, somehow be a part of it? It's issues like these that the Trinity helps to resolve. And yet, for non-Christians, this doctrine often gives rise to more questions than it answers.

