

TRINITY 2B - What the Trinity Is and Is Not

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 March 2004

Preacher: Rhys Bezzant

[0 : 00] Thank you, Paul, for your invitation last year to come and deliver this talk. I've been thinking about it and preparing for it for about the last four months. It just so happens that in the last two weeks my voice has bust, which for those of you who know me has been a pleasant change.

Take a drink. Now last night Andrew Moody was more than generous in affirming the godliness and credentials of the other speakers this week. Andrew's presentation itself was really careful and faithful and managed to hold a very difficult balance.

All credit to you, Andrew. He was like the tightrope walker. We were all holding our breath to see if he'd tip one way or the other off the tightrope. It was a suspenseful night.

Me, on the other hand, I'm like the act that follows the tightrope walker. I'm more like the clown that sent in to offer some light relief. Friends, we believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet there are people who have claimed the name Christian who have wanted either to deny that God is a holy trinity or they're so relegated it to a minor matter that they may as well not have believed it in the first place.

[1 : 12] A German theologian named Schleiermacher put his explanation of the trinity in the very last chapter of his book. He entitled it The Appendix. I presume he was talking about the chapter and not the Holy Trinity.

But either way, he thought that these ideas were somehow not to be upfront in what Christians claim to believe. Alexander Pope, the essayist and the poet, tired of all the Christian debates of theology, penned these words.

Know then thyself. Presume not God to scan. The proper study of mankind is man. And even if people want to preach the trinity, they still get themselves into problems.

In 1992, an Anglican clergyman in England named David Pryor wrote to the Times explaining something of his sermon for Trinity Sunday. He decided that he'd use a cricket analogy.

He'd seen Ian Salisbury, an English spin bowler bowl against Pakistan. And in that game, in that test match between England and Pakistan, Ian Salisbury had bowled in quick succession a leg break, a googly and a top spinner.

[2 : 22] And it dawned on him. This is one person expressing himself in three ways. Now another wag who was reading the London Times realised that this was an ancient heresy.

And so wrote in another letter to the London Times saying, dear editor, all I have to say is, wide. St Athanasius was a Christian who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries.

Sorry, the 3rd and 4th centuries. And he thought that teaching the trinity was worth the effort. He spent his life defending the notion that Father and Son and by consequence the Holy Spirit are of the same substance.

He spent his life defending the notion that Father and Son are of the same substance. And this was at least in the early days before the empire had been declared Christian.

He himself was an Egyptian. He spoke Coptic. He sang their songs. He knew what popular opinion in his neck of the woods was. And he was trained as a reader and deacon in the church in Alexandria.

[3 : 29] But his bishop, while he was yet young, still took him to the Council of Nicaea as an observer. He saw the debates at that very famous council discussing the person of the Son, whether God the Son was equal to God the Father, at least of the same substance.

He was known as the Black Dwarf because he was short and he had dark skin. In a way he wasn't an academic, though he did write copiously and cogitantly.

He wasn't a monk, though he did take refuge in monasteries in the Egyptian desert. He was more of the churchman, the pastor administrator, the keen thinker, who would stake his life on one big idea.

And God gave to St. Athanasius just the personality to help him stand up to the emperor, the councils, and his opponent Arius.

St. Athanasius thought that the Trinity was worth preaching. It was worth the effort. Though he himself was prone to outbursts, he was an angry man, he doggedly held on to this, his belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and was not a creature.

[4 : 39] That if you drew a line in the sand, you placed Jesus Christ on the creator side of the line, not on the creature side. For his opponent Arius had the ditty phrase, there was a time when he was not.

And so Athanasius refused to accept that that was an adequate reading of the Bible and a description of the Lord Jesus Christ. Athanasius insisted that if the lesson in the Old Testament is that only God can save, and if it's true that Jesus Christ himself sees himself as the saviour, then he must be God, the saviour, come to save.

God in the flesh, as the Apostle John would declare. Athanasius held this view for 45 years. And though the tide turned against him, even though the emperor at one stage favoured the party of the Arians by doing a flip-flop and ignoring the results of the Council of Nicaea itself.

And despite five exiles, totalling 17 years of his 45 in ministry, Athanasius kept on keeping on. He was exiled in Tria, now in Germany, then in Gaul.

He was exiled in a number of places around the Mediterranean basin. At one stage, trying to flee before the imperial authorities caught up with him, he was spoken to on a boat on the Red Sea.

[5 : 58] The emperor had had word that Athanasius was escaping in this way, and the boat pulled up alongside the very boat on which Athanasius was taking his flight. The man representing the imperial authority said to Athanasius from one boat to the next, Have you seen Athanasius? Do you know where he is?

Athanasius called back, Yes, he's just ahead of you. The authorities kept moving. At one stage before he was to enter exile, during the reign of an apostate emperor, who refused to acknowledge the role, the position of Christians, Athanasius fled Alexandria, his sea, with these words, Do not be led astray, brethren.

It is but a little cloud, and it will quickly pass. After his 17 years of exile, five times taken away from his sea in Alexandria, finally the emperors gave up.

For with every exile, the people in Alexandria were becoming more and more inflamed and agitated. They didn't want their bishop removed. And all this because of that one phrase, The son is of the same substance as the father.

The son is of the same substance as father. Athanasius thought that teaching the Trinity was worth the effort. But in that very phrase, The son is of the same substance as the father, there have been and continue to be great debates amongst Christians as to how fair it is to use a Greek phrase, possibly from the Greek philosophical background, to describe Christian ideas.

[7 : 25] Is it fair to take an idea from philosophy to use as your important phrase in defending that Jesus Christ is God? Isn't this a corruption of the faith to import Greek philosophy, as one scholar Harnack said?

Should we use words from outside the Bible to describe and summarise ideas from within the Bible? This special Greek word that Athanasius so fought for, homoosios, was the word that was in contention.

Now that word doesn't appear in the Bible. But Andrew showed us last night that there's many good reasons from the scriptures to argue that God isn't just an undifferentiated whole, an indistinct blob, but that God has within himself distinctions and relationships.

Andrew just towards John chapter 1 verse 1, that you could turn to 1 Corinthians 12, the first verses, or Matthew 3, 13 to 17, 1 Peter 1, 1 to 2, to see God being described in a way which shows that God can't be merely described as one.

His oneness somehow must be differentiated. And Andrew really helpfully showed that one way of summarising the whole message of the Bible is to see it as the outworking of God's plan to glorify the Son, and the Son's role in bringing glory to the Father.

[8 : 45] Now it is true that the doctrine of the Trinity, as we've come to believe it, developed after the Bible was written and after the canon was closed. But to use Greek words of the same substance, for example, is not trying to displace the authority of the Bible.

It's not trying to say that this Greek idea is of more importance than the Bible. It's merely trying to resolve a debate about the meaning of Bible words, drawing together various strands to make and bring some clarity where there have previously been amongst Christians disagreement.

This is not caving in to a Greek way of thinking about a God who is very, very distant, unknowable, or disinterested in our lives. Using a Greek word or a Greek idea is a way of securing our belief that we can know God.

We can meet God in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, the Trinity isn't an imported idea from Greek philosophy. It's biblically driven, not philosophically driven.

Well, did one person just invent the doctrine of the Trinity? Okay, Rhys, you've shown to some degree that it's not import that's unfaithful to the message of the Scriptures.

[10:00] Who came up with the idea? There are people, of course, in modern days who argue that Christians project onto God the kind of most basic wishes or desires of their heart, and they use God, they construct God in a way to cope with the anxieties or the difficulties they themselves experience in life, projecting onto God our deepest needs.

But the doctrine of the Trinity is not the random idea of one person meaning his own deepest and complex emotional needs.

There's no one person's name who can be assigned responsibility for developing these ideas.

There's no Einstein's theory of relativity here, no Newton's theory of something else.

I think it's probably gravity. And even though we talk about the Athanasian Creed, we'll be saying it afterwards, actually it's a misnomer. Athanasius himself wasn't responsible for the final product.

Besides which, developing thinking about the Holy Trinity didn't occur just in one place with one or two people. Justin spoke about the Trinity in Alexandria and Rome.

[11:07] Irenaeus spoke about the Trinity in Gaul. Tertullian spoke about the Trinity in North Africa. Basil spoke about the Trinity in Asia Minor, as did Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa. Ambrose spoke about the Trinity in Milan.

Augustine spoke about the Trinity in Carthage. Athanasius was in Rome and Alexandria and other places where he was exiled. Hilary was in Gaul. This is not one person's fabrication.

This is not the kind of wake up one morning and decide, hey, I'm going to invent the Trinity. This is over some hundreds of years, Christians with fine minds sharpening each other, working out how best can we present faithfully the words of the Bible in describing the God in whom we've come to trust.

Now, the doctrine of the Trinity isn't an imposition from Greek philosophy on the Bible, nor is the doctrine of the Trinity a random result of eccentric philosophers.

Nor is the doctrine of the Trinity practically irrelevant, though you can move in some churches and come to that very conclusion. Of course, it might seem technically difficult, and there have been some writers who say, should Christians spend so much time arguing about words and vowels, fine distinctions between philosophical ideas, all just to the outcome that you could say the sons are the same substance as the father.

[12:30] But if God decides to reveal himself through words, if God presents himself through the medium of the word, then is it too much for us to make fine distinctions?

Might it actually be that God the Holy Spirit uses fine distinctions in helping us live obediently in this world? Words themselves are constructed in order that human beings can make fine distinctions.

That's what words exist to do. Some people think that arguments about words are just technical and ought not to play a part in our lives. No, if God's given us words, then I think it's our duty to use them and to think about them wisely.

Some people think the Trinity is irrelevant because it's a sexist construction. How could a modern person possibly worship a God who's made himself known through the words Father and Son with such gender-specific language?

The ancients, though, didn't have quite this problem because God, when he came and took flesh, came through the body of a woman taking the flesh of a man.

[13:32] The ancients regarded the incarnation of Jesus Christ as honouring both men and women. If the Saviour were born a woman of a woman, there would be no honour given to men.

And besides which, Jesus, as a male, never used his gender to manipulate or to invalidate the experience of women. One of the few prerogatives of maleness that he took upon himself was circumcision put on him.

You know, to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is practically irrelevant because it's technical or because it's sexist or because it's foreign to what's important in ministry would be a misreading. Some people think, no, look, I just want to get out there and convert the world. I just want to get out there and tell people about Jesus. Why should I be bothered with complicated ideas about God, Father, Son, and Spirit? In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity, some people say to me, gets in the way. Why fuss about words, Rhys, while people are going to hell? Well, no, we can't let ourselves go down that track because the doctrine of the Trinity at the end is at the heart of our evangelism. The God to whom we want people to be introduced is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[14:36] Those whom we want to share our faith with have to come to know the fullness of the God in whom we've believed. While Jesus is certainly the shop front, the riches in the store are worth getting to know.

Well, three ideas. What the Trinity is not. It's not a random imposition on the Bible. It's not the result of some men who'd put up on the wrong side of the bed.

And nor can it be argued, I think, cogently that it's irrelevant to our lives or our faith. So what is the doctrine of the Trinity? Let me explain it in these three ways.

At its heart, the Trinity explains our belief that God can interact with our world. That God can interact with our world. For in the ancient world, this was not a given.

In the ancient world, God was so distant that he could never have contact with mere human beings. Any contact with this world would corrupt God. He was distant, a policeman or lawmaker perhaps, but not having contact with this world.

[15:37] And if he did have contact with this world, he'd have to send a chain of messengers to let us know what he was thinking or doing. The other view in the ancient world was that God was so immersed in the world that he had no distinct personality or will, much like lots of New Age religions today.

The ancient world had these two opposing views of God. Either he was so distant you could never know him, or he was so immersed in this world he had no distinct personality or will. Yet Christians want to believe that God is both the creator and involved in my life.

God is both other than me and close to me. And you know what? It's our jewel in the crown. It's the doctrine of the Holy Trinity which allows me to say that God is both other and close.

That God is both the creator and concerned. For when the Lord Jesus comes into this world, he doesn't find himself compromised because he's touched something that's unholy.

In fact, when the Lord Jesus comes to this world, he makes us holy. Jesus is God's right-hand man. As I mentioned, in some ancient worldviews, the distance between us and God was so great that God had to have a series of messengers to make his will known.

[16:52] There was, as it were, lots of barriers or layers between us and God. I turned on a go, I visited Hampton Court Palace in London. When King William came to the throne, he built his own annex.

And this is how his annex works. His chief throne was in a very, very distant room with some six or eight rooms between him and the foyer. And if you were to visit King William, you might be escorted into the first room and then wait.

And at the king's pleasure, you might enter the second room and wait. And third and fourth and fifth and sixth. And it might just so happen that if the king was in a good mood that day, you'd get right to the end of the corridor.

You would move with lots of delays, with lots of barriers, with lots of permission giving, right down the corridor to actually arrive at the throne. This was constructed so that you would know that he was the king and you so weren't.

Very occasionally, of course, the king would leave his throne and perhaps come down one or two rooms and meet some visiting king, visiting diplomat, in a room other than the end room.

[17:56] And that would be his way of showing that he thought you or the government that you represented was important. How interesting it is that this is not the way Christians understand the God in whom they've placed their trust.

For the God in whom we believe, yes, his throne room is a long way away, but he travels the whole distance down the corridor, doesn't expect us to go anywhere. We can't. There's no waiting.

There's no barriers. Jesus Christ himself is the man who comes to mediate. Our belief in God, the Holy Trinity, is our belief that God can interact with our world, with me, without compromising his

very nature as God.

How great it is that he went the distance for us. A assured belief in God is possible. The Trinity is more than just an explanation that the God in whom we believe is a God who interacts with this world.

It's also a defence of the deity of the Son and the Spirit. For when we say that we believe in God, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, we're wedging Father, Son and Spirit as close as we can together to remind ourselves that they all bear the nature of God.

[19 : 07] In describing God, the Holy Trinity, we're defending the deity of the Son. We're defending the deity of the Spirit. By believing in God, the Holy Trinity, we're confessing that the Son is of the same substance as the Father.

There has never been a moment when Son and Spirit did not exist, nor a moment when they were other than, in essence, God himself. If we stopped believing in the Trinity, very soon we'd stop believing that Jesus, the Son, and the Spirit are to be described as divine as well.

The doctrine of the Trinity secures it. Just imagine you go to a circus tent. There's some significant poles, perhaps keeping the big top up, and there'll be around the perimeter of the tent very significant ropes which keep the structure up as well.

Now, if you look carefully enough, there's probably hundreds and hundreds of small guy ropes that do their job stopping the tent sides from flapping. To stop believing in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wouldn't be just to unpeg one of the small guy ropes around the side.

It would be to remove the rope that actually keeps the whole big top up. Not all things that Christians believe are of the same kind of significance or of the same kind of importance, but our belief in the Trinity is one of those central views, central doctrines without which the whole edifice collapses.

[20 : 32] Without the Trinity, there is no incarnation, no atonement, no resurrection, no assurance of salvation, no value attached to this material order or to this life, no hope of heaven.

Without the Trinity, we can't actually believe that we have forgiveness of sins because we can't know that God received the sacrifice of his Son, that the atonement really worked. There is a danger for us evangelicals that we're so fixed on Jesus that the truth of God, the Holy Trinity, might be lost.

There might be short-term advantages in talking up the person of the Son, but long-term disadvantages for lots of our other beliefs if we don't hold fast the importance of the Trinity.

One significant evangelical writer has written, Evangelicals display the tendency of marching off at a tangent on the trajectory of the historic church and as such can easily preach a variant form of Christianity, which is now in danger of losing its grasp on the very faith which it holds so dear.

The Trinity is an explanation of belief that the God in whom we place in our trust can interact with this world and it helps us defend the deity of the Son and the Spirit. But finally, it's an invitation as well to love and to live.

[21 : 39] For the Bible is not concerned with mere speculation. The Bible is not encouraging us to believe these things merely because it has a penchant for difficult ideas or words or phrases.

We believe in God, the Holy Trinity, because we believe in mission. Jesus says, As the Father sent me, so I send you. As Jesus says, You will receive power when the Spirit comes.

Go and make disciples, teaching and baptising in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The fact that we can know God, the fact that God is powerful to save, fuels our mission.

We reach out only because we know God is already reaching out with his two arms, his Son and his Spirit. Furthermore, the love which God has for us is not a love that's born of God's loneliness or insecurity.

We of course know that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. But that's because within himself, God is love. And when God shares his love, he's not desperately clinging to human beings, hoping just desperately that they might turn around and give him some time in the day.

[22 : 48] God is in himself, Father, Son and Spirit, full of love. And he wants to share it with us. As the Father has loved me, Jesus says, So I have loved you. Jesus says in John 17, May they be completely one, Father, so the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me.

The Trinity is the foundation upon which we can say that God is love. And it's the foundation upon which we say that God has loved us. And not merely that God has come to us, but that when God

has come to us, he incorporates us into his own life.

We are in Christ. Christ is our older brother. We are in the Spirit. We are made like Christ. We're in that fantastic picture that Andrew shared with us last night.

As the Father hugs the Son, the Father is hugging us because we are in Christ. God has invited us to share in his own fellowship.

God is a party. We are invited. Jesus says, My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

[23 : 55] For while in much of Western society, our lives are becoming increasingly depersonalized, Christians are rediscovering the importance of relationships in their bedrock belief of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Well, is confessing the Trinity worth the cost? Because in our day, saying that we're Christians who believe in God, Father, Son, and Spirit is difficult, and in certain sectors mocked.

Is it worth bearing the cost? Is it really that important that it's going to shape our lives? Athanasius had died, and it seemed like his cause had failed.

Not only those within the empire, but the Goths outside the empire as well had repudiated the Catholic faith and had confessed that Arius was right. The Son was not of the same substance as the Father.

St. Jerome would then go on to say, The whole world groaned to find itself Arius. It looked like the cause of Christ had been lost. Under God's good hand, with the change of emperors, with support from the church in Rome, political pressure, and preaching tours in the East, finally the Catholic faith, the Orthodox faith, won the day.

[24 : 59] Even though Athanasius had died in year 373, even though it was only after his death that finally the Orthodox cause was won, it had been worth the cost for Athanasius, though he never saw the outcome.

Christian faith had been pulled back from the brink. It is, for many, old-fashioned to believe in doctrine. It's narrow, it's doctrinaire, it's dry, it's unpopular to believe in a creed.

And from our end, it certainly means we have to be intellectually rigorous to defend why we believe what we believe. Because we are in a minority in our culture. It will mean keeping searching the scriptures and making sure that we know what we believe and why.

But friends, unless we lay good foundations, our work is in jeopardy. You know as well as I, that if you skimp on the foundations, you're asking for your building to fall. How great it was that 150 years ago in Doncaster, foundations were laid, belief in the Holy Trinity was confessed, which now you are reaping the benefits of.

The blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled, so that their flesh is purified. How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works, so that we might worship the living God.

[26 : 14] And what I want us to do is to worship our living God now by saying together the Athanasian Creed. This is one of the creeds that the Anglican Church regards as its foundation, and it describes our belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I think the last time I said the Athanasian Creed in church was about 1986. I thought it was time to give it a run again. If I can please ask you to stand, and we'll say this together. The Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit.

Uncreated is the Father, uncreated is the Son, uncreated is the Spirit. The Father is infinite, the Son is infinite, the Holy Spirit is infinite. Eternal is the Father, eternal is the Son, eternal is the Spirit.

And yet there are not three eternal beings, but one who is eternal, as there are not three uncreated and unlimited beings, but one who is created and unlimited.

Almighty is the Father, almighty is the Son, almighty is the Spirit. And yet there are not three almighty beings, but one who is almighty. Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God.

[27 : 22] And yet there are not three gods, but one God. Thus the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet there are not three lords, but one Lord.

As Christian truth compels us to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, So Catholic faith forbids us to say that there are three gods, all Lord.

The Father was neither made, nor created, nor begotten. The Son was neither made, nor created, but was alone begotten of the Father. The Spirit was neither made, nor created, but is proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Thus there is one Father, not three fathers, one Son, not three sons, one Holy Spirit, not three spirits. And in this Trinity, no one is before or after, greater or less than the other.

But all three persons are in themselves, co-eternal and co-equal. And so we must worship the Trinity in unity, and the one God in three persons.

[28 : 25] Whoever wants to be saved, should think thus about the Trinity. It is necessary for eternal salvation, that one also faithfully believe, that our Lord Jesus Christ became flesh.

For this is the true faith, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man. He is God, begotten before all worlds, from the being of the Father.

And he is man, born in the world, from the beginning of his mother, existing fully as God, and fully as man, with a rational soul, and a human body.

Equal to the Father in divinity, subordinate to the Father in humanity. Although he is God and man, he is not divided, but is one Christ. He is united, because God has taken humanity into himself.

He does not transform deity into humanity. He is completely one, in the unity of his person, without confusing his natures. For as the rational soul and body are one person, so the one Christ is God and man.

[29 : 30] He suffered death for our salvation. He descended into hell, and rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

At his coming, all people shall rise bodily, given account of their own deeds. Those who have done good, will enter eternal life. Those who have done evil, will enter eternal fire.

This is the Catholic faith. One cannot be saved, without believing this firmly and faithfully. Amen and Amen. Please be seated.

Well, thank you very much, Rhys. In a moment, both Rhys and Paul Barker are going to come up again, and we're going to have some questions. The question was, is it not also true in the modern world, that there are people who believe that God is unknowable and distant, and Islam being given the example.

I don't know enough about Islam to confidently speak about Islamic faith, but it is true that there are lots of people in the ancient world and in the modern world who will hold to a monad, a God who is one.

[30 : 34] His oneness is indistinguishable, and consequently, you can't ever get purchase on him. You can never actually work out how to get into him because of his sheer oneness. But it is a recurring idea, even if not in Islam, I can't speak for Islam, but in other worldviews as well.

Andrew Moody had a very helpful comment about this last night, that begottenness describes relationship, and eternal means that that relationship has no beginning. It's taking up a word from John's Gospel, so it's not a word that's been invented by Christians.

It's one that they've... The question for the sake of the tape is one describing the recent discoveries of Coptic texts, which might suggest that the Holy Spirit could be described in feminine terms.

I don't know if about ancient Coptic. That probably comes as no surprise. But interestingly, in Greek, it's the neuter gender, linguistically, that describes the spirit, and sometimes Bible writers break rules of grammar to use the masculine pronoun, he, in order to make sure people understand that the spirit is actually personal and not an indistinct force.

Now, I don't want to enter the debate in terms of what the Coptic texts say or don't say, but I'm still just relieved that the personality of the spirit is affirmed rather than the spirit being merely a force.

[31 : 56] Thank you.