

The Trinity of God

With the coming of March, two important historical Christian figures, Patrick, the patron of Ireland, and David, the patron of my ancestral land of Wales, come to mind. Patrick was a fifth century Christian who was from Britain, but captured by slavers who sold him to the Irish. Later he gained his freedom, returned home, and then went back to Ireland to take the Gospel to the pagans there. His feast day is March 17 (St. Patrick's Day). David was a sixth-century believer who consistently opposed the Pelagian heresy (which denied original sin, and denied the need for God's grace to be saved). His feast day is March 1 (St. David's Day), on which our oldest daughter Cora was born. It is said that Patrick sought to explain the Trinity (One God in Three Persons) to his Irish hearers.

There is only one God, yet He exists eternally as three distinct Persons. Each of these Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is fully God. The Son is to be eternally begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit then eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. In other words, they *always have been*. The Trinity distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. The Trinity is connected with the believer's salvation. To be a Christian, one must believe in the Trinity (not understand it, just believe it). Christianity rests on the work of each member of the Godhead, and without the Trinity, there is no real Christianity.

1. The Old Testament points to the Trinity. Beginning with the self-reference to plurality "Let Us make man in Our own image," and the continued self-reference in a plural fashion, "Elohim."

2. The New Testament teaches the Trinity (Matthew 28:19-20). The very initiatory rite of the Christian faith—baptism—is a Trinitarian exposition, in that all three Persons have a role in our salvation. In our baptismal rite among the Brethren, we emphasize our Trinitarian faith. We explicitly recognize that God is Three in One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—by having a threefold immersion in one baptism.

3. The Bible teaches that the Father is God (1 Peter 1:3). God is called "Father" at least 235 times in the New Testament. Jesus speaks of His own intimate relationship with His Father in Heaven. Jesus distinguishes His own existence both in union with and separate from God the Father.

4. The Bible teaches that the Son is God (Isaiah 9:6; Hebrews 1:8). The Son to come would be the Eternal God. And God refers to the Son, saying, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom."

5. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). Ananias and Sapphira, in lying to the Holy Spirit, clearly are described by Dr. Luke as lying to God.

When thinking of the Trinity, it is helpful to state what the Trinity is not. The Trinity is *not* three Gods (*tri-theism*) or three separate beings. The Trinity is *not* three forms of the same God (*modalism*, that is, God is revealed as the Father in the Old Testament, as the Son in the New Testament, and as the Holy Spirit in the church age). God the Father did *not* create the other two Persons (*Arianism*, taught by Jehovah's Witnesses today).

Millard Erickson, the evangelical theologian, points out why the Trinity teaching is so important. He says, "This doctrine historically was the first that the church felt it necessary to elaborate in a definitive fashion. ... It was deemed essential to the life of the church to hold this doctrine...." Erickson goes on to state that the doctrine of the Trinity is "important at a time when we are encountering many different religions" and "it clearly distinguishes Christianity from the strongly monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam," while "it separates Christianity from polytheistic and pantheistic religions such as the Eastern religions" (*Making Sense of the Trinity*, pp. 13-15).

The Trinity is not the easiest explained teaching. But it is Biblical. That is why we must believe it, uphold it, and teach it to others. Erickson says, "Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind; try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul."