

On The Trinity

John 14:15-31

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Dean VanEvery

June 1, 2025

Today is the start of a two-part mini-series, and it'll have a little bit of tension built into it. So, I'll start it today, but then take two weeks off, and finish it on the 22nd.

Michael will start our next major series on the 29th, so we had a few more or less stand-alone sermons lined up for the month of June.

I was scheduled to preach today and the 22nd - but it wasn't originally supposed to be a two-parter. I was supposed to preach two separate topics, but this past week as I was working on this text, I got through about the first point and realized that if I stopped there it would already be about 35 or 40 minutes - so, we had to readjust a bit.

So, we'll come back to the same text on the 22nd, and just pick up where we leave off today.

We'll get through verse 20 today - and I think that actually works pretty well as a sermon division - today will be a bit more big-picture, and the next part will look at three key applications of the idea.

So, this mini-series will be all about the Trinity.

This summer marks the 1700th anniversary of one of the most important events in the life of the church since Pentecost. 1700 years ago, this summer, from Mid-May through the end of July in the year 325 AD, a bunch of theologians and pastors met in a suburb of Istanbul called Nicaea to deal with the Arian controversy. The result of that meeting was the first draft of what we call the Nicene Creed. That creed outlined in brief the doctrinal core of what it means to be orthodox, to be a Bible-believing Christian. The center-piece of that meeting, and that document is the doctrine of the Trinity. This is where the parameters for Trinitarian orthodoxy first start to get really hammered out – one being, three persons.

So, that being the case, it seemed like a good time to preach the Trinity.

Now, I want to preach the Trinity today, but not so much the *doctrine* of the Trinity, but the *experience* of the Trinity.

Why?

Because lack of clarity on the doctrine of the Trinity is downstream of a lack of understanding of the experience of the Trinity.

What we *know* about the Trinity is formed by how we *experience* the Trinity.

That's true Biblically, we'll see that here in this text. And that's true historically, we see that in how the doctrine of the Trinity actually came to be formulated there at Nicaea. And it's also true personally.

So, a lack of clarity on what it means to experience of the Trinity, tends to lead to an underdeveloped doctrine of the Trinity. So, we kind of affirm it but then just leave it alone. "God is one being and three persons." But then, we just kind of seal it off from how we think about God and the gospel.

So, the Trinity stays almost entirely in our heads, and doesn't shape our hearts or our hands. It stays as something that we know, but not something that shapes the experience of the Christian life.

This is, in some sense, just an example of a bigger problem.

The Bible paints a picture of the Christian life that flows out of an integrated self, where head, heart, and hands are all in sync and pulling together. Paul stresses this point right at the beginning of his instructions to Timothy - his pastoral protégé.

In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul says, "the aim of our charge is love, that issues from a pure heart, and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

In other words - the goal of ministry is to cultivate love for God and neighbor that flows out of a right heart - "pure heart," right hands, or actions, "good conscience," and a right head - "sincere faith."

Sincere faith, pure heart, good conscience. Head, heart, hands. What you know, what you feel, what you do.

That's the goal, that's what we're all striving for, but we all tend to prioritize one or the other of those.

So, there are three types of churches, or three types of Christian ministries: Head churches, heart churches, and hand churches. There are some churches that are all about theology and doctrine, some churches that are all about Christian experience and feeling, and there are some churches that are all about Christian activity.

And there are different flavors of all of these. Some head churches are all about history and tradition. Some are all about theology and the Bible. Some are all about apologetics or cultural engagement.

And then, some heart churches are all about musical experience, and aesthetics - could be ancient cathedrals and stained glass, or smoke machines and lasers. Some heart churches are all about self-understanding and personal identity, and personal wholeness and healing.

And some hand churches are all about mercy ministries. Some are all about discipleship, missions, and evangelism. And some are all about moral and ethical dos and don'ts.

And to be clear - everything on that list is good - there's a time and place for all of that in the life of the church - not one thing on that list is silly.

It's the lack of proportion that's the problem, it's the lack of harmonious integration that's the problem.

One of the more pervasive effects of the fall is *disintegration* - the dismembering of harmonious and symphonic wholes into detached parts.

So, in Adam's fall, creation is disintegrated, detached from our moment by moment life in God.

As a race, humanity is disintegrated from the rest of creation. We are disintegrated from each other, as groups and as individuals. And we are even disintegrated within ourselves.

This comes out in our lack of harmony between our heads, our hearts, and our hands.

We know one thing is right, but we do another. We know grace and mercy, but we struggle to do grace and mercy. Or we know the gospel, but we don't feel the gospel. Or we hate our sin, but we still do our sin. Or we do loving and merciful things with hearts of bitterness or disinterest.

So, each of us kind of tend to gravitate towards one part of the Christian life or the other. Some of us love theology and doctrine. Some of us are quick to get into the heart work of the gospel, for ourselves, and for others. And some of us just want to do - give me spiritual disciplines, give me evangelism projects, give me mercy projects to work on.

And so in our age of choice, these people tend to gravitate towards each other - so we get head churches, heart churches, and hand churches.

So, aiming for balance between the three is a step in the right direction, but still not quite a solution.

Like, instead of just focusing in on one of the three, we try to diversify ourselves. We pick up a theology book, or we go to a spiritual disciplines seminar, or we find some worship music that moves us.

And that's good, but that's not the solution. We're not just looking for balance, but integration - wholeness. Not just doctrine + affections + actions. But doctrine that burns our affections and drives our actions. We're not just looking for three in balance, but three as one harmonious whole - where three become one.

And, that's kind of the frustrating part - I can't do that. I can't do that for you, I can't even do that for me. We can move towards balance - but only God can give the kind of heat we need to melt the three down and remake them as one. Only when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to show us the glory of the Father shining in the Son is that integration going to start to happen.

And that's why I want to look at the Trinity today - why look at the Trinity?

First, I think it's one of the most *doctriny* doctrines there is - other doctrines are a lot easier to feel, a lot easier to see how they effect life as it's actually lived. But the Trinity tends to live in our heads as something of an abstraction most of the time.

Second, it is the hub of the issue. The Trinity, I think, isn't just an example of this divided Christian life, but I think it's where the fault lines meet.

Throughout church history theologians have grouped doctrines together into three parts, under the Father, under the Son, and under the Spirit.

And head churches tend to get excited about Father doctrines - creation, God's attributes, providence, election.

Hand churches tend to get excited about Son doctrines - redemption accomplished, justification, the kingdom of God, Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King.

And Heart churches tend to get excited about Spirit doctrines - sanctification, restoration, spiritual gifts, personal wholeness.

So, the Trinity seems to be the hub of the issue. If we can integrate head, heart, and hands when it comes to the Trinity, I think we'll be a long way towards a more comprehensive integration.

Which leads to the third reason, *experiencing the Trinity* is the beginning of the solution. When we start to feel the Trinitarian whole of the Christian life, we start to live in more and more integration. Head informing heart and hands, heart reinforcing head and strengthening the hands, and hands expressing the head and the heart.

And so that's my goal - not to make that happen, but just to help you long for that, to long to *feel* the trinitarian shape of the Christian life.

So, here's my point, here's the big point for today that I hope to show you in John 14 - ***Experiencing God as Trinity is key to living an integrated Christian life.***

[PRAY]

Ok, so, let's jump in. Go ahead and look at the first three verses, 15 through 17.

Here he's basically just setting up what he's going to expand on over the next couple chapters - we'll be brief here, because it's just him setting up the topic of the Holy Spirit.

This is really an interesting moment in John. Through the book he has been fleshing out what the Father-Son divine relationship looks like, now he kind of suddenly just unveils a third person - this *other* helper. He's *like* the Son, but *distinct* from the Son.

Notice verse 15 - **"If you love me you will keep my commandments"**

Here you see him already tying together the heart and the hands. Love for Jesus looks like obedience to Jesus.

Then notice 16 - **"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever"**

So, notice it's not just the Son or just the Father who sends the Spirit - both are involved - the Son asks, the Father gives.

Then look at 17 - **"even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."**

A few things here. First, just notice that knowledge of the Spirit is downstream here of experience of the Spirit. You know the Spirit because he lives in you.

Then second, notice how Jesus connects the Spirit to himself - he is the Spirit of Truth, but only 11 verses earlier Jesus called himself the way, and THE TRUTH, and the life. So, what the Spirit is so Jesus himself is.

But also, notice this contrast between the ministry of the Son and the ministry of the Spirit.

The Son's earthly ministry was external, visible, and temporary. The Spirit's ministry is internal, invisible, and permanent.

So, basically he's just setting up this passage here - when I depart, the Father and I will send the Spirit - he's like the Son in very important ways, but also different in very important ways.

Ok, so let's turn to verses 18 through 20, where Jesus starts to explain what is going to happen when he sends the Spirit – this is where we'll spend the rest of our time, this is the big idea – **the experience of God is Trinitarian.**

All true experience of God is experience of the Triune God.

Ok, so, what's happening here, in this passage more broadly, is that Jesus is preparing his disciples for his coming departure - for his Cross, Resurrection, and ascension to the Father.

Before today's passage, in 1 through 14 he's stressing that so far he's helped them get something of the theological dimension, the upward dimension - he's shown them the Father.

And he's given them the practical dimension, the outward dimension of discipleship.

But here, he's stressing their need for more, for something to pull it together - they, and we - need the inward dimension too.

Ok, look at verse 18, **"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."**

Why does he say orphans? Why not something else? Why not, "I will not leave you as students without a teacher? Or as sheep without a shepherd? Or subjects without a king?" He says, "I will not leave you like children without a *father*."

He says, "I will be as a father to you."

But then notice this - isn't this odd - he says, "I will come to you." So, he's talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He's not just talking about a post-resurrection reality, where Jesus teaches the disciples for another month and a half, but post-ascension, when he sends the Holy Spirit.

So, he's saying, when I send the Holy Spirit, in Him, *I* will come to you, and the *Father* will be a father to you.

So, this is the first thing we need to understand - When Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live in us, he doesn't send a third of God - when the Holy Spirit lives in you, the whole Trinity lives in you.

He gets more explicit about this in verse 23, and we'll see that in a couple weeks. To have the Holy Spirit is to have the Father and the Son.

Then, notice that last little phrase of 19, **"because I live, you also will live."**

In the gospel, our lives are tied up with Christ's life.

Christ's resurrection guarantees our resurrection.

And Christ's unending life guarantees our unending life.

And what he's going to say in the next verse is basically that the Spirit in us is the ongoing testimony of the life of Christ alive in us.

So, let's go there, look at verse 20, **"In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."**

Ok, so this is where it gets a bit difficult - what he's saying, basically, is this - "when you receive the Holy Spirit everything that you have *misunderstood* about me - Jesus - you will understand."

So, tying it back in with the last verse - "because I live, you also will live" – What the Holy Spirit is doing in us is making us feel the life and presence of Jesus in ourselves. He's testifying to the fact that Jesus is alive.

Ok, in verse 20, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will teach us three things: Christ's divinity, our security in Christ, and the power of God in us.

He teaches us something doctrinal, something for the head - Christ's divinity.

He teaches us something experiential, something for the heart - our security in Christ.

And he teaches us something practical, for the hands - Christ in us leading us.

This is what the Holy Spirit does in us. First, he points us to Christ - he helps us see who Jesus really is. Second, he unites us to Christ - he brings us into union with Christ, and assures us of our life in him. And third he brings Christ to us, as our very present teacher, and shepherd, and guide - our prophet, priest, and king.

This is what I mean by the doctrine of the Trinity being downstream of the experience of the Trinity. It's through the Holy Spirit that we really start to *get* the Trinity. The Spirit helps us see and *feel* who Jesus is, precisely by showing us the Father in the Son. So, this is what Christ is saying here - *the experience of the Christian life is comprehensively Trinitarian* - From the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

The disciples were agitated because they didn't want to lose Jesus, and that's understandable of course. But what Jesus is saying is that it's better for him to go away - why? Because when he goes, he

will send the Spirit. And it's not like the Spirit is better than Jesus, but that in the Spirit we *experience* the whole Triune God in a way that's different and fuller than just the human nature of Christ.

In verses 1 through 14 in this chapter Jesus is basically saying, "if you really knew Jesus, you'd know the Father - to know Jesus is to know the Father."

But then, in 15 through 31 he's saying, "you won't really understand the Son - you won't really understand Jesus - until you receive the Holy Spirit – until you experience the Holy Spirit."

When we receive the Holy Spirit, he unites us to Christ by faith - helping us to really understand who Jesus is, and in that, to see the Father in him. And at the same time, he unites Christ to us by his power. So, all our life as Christians is given by the Holy Spirit, through the Son, from the Father.

Ok, pause. Does that feel a little confusing? Don't feel alone in that. There's at least three good reasons why Jesus' teaching here on the Trinity might be hard to grasp.

First – a big part of it is just on me - there's a way to make this more clear that I just haven't figured out yet. So, please don't write off this doctrine just because of me. But also, don't write yourself off just because of me either. Give me some time to get better at this, and give yourself some time to keep piecing the puzzle together one bit at a time. No one ever just got this on the first go. So, if any of this is new to you, or foreign, or confusing, please, just be patient with yourself.

Second - the Trinity just defies our comprehension. There's a lot that the Lord has revealed, and we should try to understand what he's told us about himself - but at the end of the day, there's just a limit to what finite, created, contingent beings can know about the infinite, uncreated, absolute triune source of all being.

Augustine has a great line in his book on the Trinity. In trying to explain what we mean by 'person' when we're talking about the Trinity, he says, "because the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, they are certainly three... Yet when you ask 'three what?' human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we say three *persons*, not in order to say *that* precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence." (Trinity, V.2)

In other words, we have to say something! Even what we know "one being, three persons" is still shrouded in mystery - what does it mean for one being to be three persons? Words fail here.

Ok, but the third reason this is hard to grasp is this - there's just an experiential dimension to the Trinity that you have to start to notice to be able to really wrap your mind around. Experiencing the trinity and living Trinitarianly are upstream of the doctrine of the Trinity. As we start to understand the contours of Trinitarian life, we start to see and experience it more and more - as we experience the Trinity more, we start to understand it more and more.

I think this is kind of like what happens when you learn to paint. I heard this recently and it really stuck with me. When you start to learn to paint, eventually you start to get more interested in how colors interact, and subtle nuances between colors, shade and light and all the rest. What's really interesting, is that while this is happening you start to notice more nuance and diversity in the world around you. You start to appreciate the subtle differences in the hues of greens in the trees, and how the light and shadow are intermixing.

All the color and lighting were there the whole time, but you weren't really able to appreciate the subtle beauty of it until you started to get more and more sensitive to how colors interact. And, being more sensitive to this, you actually are able to understand and appreciate it more and more. Experience promotes understanding, and understanding promotes experience.

This is the same thing that happens with experiencing and understanding the Trinity. It's all there now, you see it all now. But as you start to experience the Trinity, you'll begin to notice the Trinitarian contours of faith all over the place. The more we understand the Trinity, the more we start to experience the Trinity in life, and the more we experience the Trinity, the more we start to understand.

This is why Jesus doesn't say - when I *tell you* about the Holy Spirit, then you'll start to understand the Trinity.

But, when you actually experience the Holy Spirit, you will start to understand the Trinity.

So, what I want to do here is just dig a bit deeper into verse 20. So, look at verse 20 again, "In that day" so, remember, he's talking about when he sends the Holy Spirit to live in his people. So, when

the Holy Spirit comes, he goes on, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Here’s the basic idea – he’s saying that when we receive the Holy Spirit he will transform how we see Jesus, how we see the Father, and how we see the Holy Spirit. Let’s dig into those one at a time.

First, “I am in the Father” - The Holy Spirit transforms the way we see Jesus by showing us the Father in the Son. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to make us see Jesus for who he really is. Without the Spirit we can respect Jesus, he might be a holy man, or a good teacher, but the Holy Spirit makes us see the truth. In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul says, “no one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.” So, we need the Holy Spirit to really get Jesus. But Paul goes even further. He compares this work of the Spirit in us to God creating light out of darkness.

In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul says, "For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

So first, did you catch that comparison? The same God who created light out of nothing - that same God, by that same divine power has given light to your heart, your soul to see the Father shining in Jesus.

Conversion is just as mighty a miracle as creation out of nothing.

So, the Holy Spirit transforms the way we see the Son.

Then second, "You are in me" - the Holy Spirit transforms the way we see the Father by showing us the Father as *our* Father - as those who are accepted and beloved in the Son.

Galatians 4:6-7 says, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

And, Romans 8:14-17, says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."

So, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ - through the Spirit of the Son we become Sons of God.

Through the Spirit of the Beloved we become beloved.

When we receive the Holy Spirit we *know* that we are in the Son, accepted, justified, adopted, loved, in the Son.

Being a son or daughter of God is intimately Trinitarian. You are a child of God because you have in you the Spirit of the Son of God.

So, the Holy Spirit changes the way we see the Father.

Then last, "I in you" - the Holy Spirit transforms the way we see the Holy Spirit by being the love of God to us.

Romans 5:8, says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But before that, he says in Romans 5:5, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

So, the love of God is something first demonstrated in history at the cross - where God *accomplishes* our redemption.

But then the love of God is brought home to us in our hearts through the Holy Spirit - when God *applies* our redemption.

All experience of God is Trinitarian experience of God.

All experience of the Holy Spirit is as the one who shows us the glory of the Father in the Son.

All experience of the Son is as the one sent from the Father who revives us and guides us through the Holy Spirit.

All experience of the Father is through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Gregory of Nazianzus, a theologian from what is now Istanbul, born shortly after the Nicene Council, says this - "No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one." In other words, whenever I think of the One God, I can't help but see him in three persons, but when I think of each person separately, I can't help but be brought back to the One God.

Really, I have a fairly modest goal for you today. All I hope to accomplish is to help you start to develop a desire to experience the Christian life as Trinitarian. To kind of take the Trinity out of its doctrinal seal and actually live into it. To let it be more to you than just a doctrinal affirmation that you don't really know how to do anything with.

In a couple weeks, when I come back to this topic, we'll finish out this passage and get a little more practical. We'll look at three ways that the Trinity shapes the Christian life.

In 21-23 we'll see how love, both to and from God is Trinitarian.

In 24-26 we'll see how God's Word to us is Trinitarian.

And in 27-31 we'll see how the gospel, redemption from sins, is Trinitarian.

But for now, we'll pause here. We'll take this as our starting point in a few weeks.

For now, we just need to reflect on what Jesus said in verse 20, "in that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you."

Somehow, receiving the Holy Spirit helps us to know that The Son is in the Father, that we are in the Son, and that the Father and the Son are in us.

The Trinity isn't some doctrinal riddle to be either played with like a word game, or respectfully ignored like some ancient artifact.

The whole Christian life is Trinitarian. All that we receive from God comes from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. And all that we offer to God - prayer, worship, service, whatever - we offer in the Holy Spirit, through the Son, to the Father.

This mystery is deep - and growing in understanding of it, can't just be an intellectual project. It can't be less than that - we need to think carefully. But we also need to humbly, believingly experience God as Triune - as Trinity.

One of the main ways that we experience the Trinity is in the Lord's supper.

Jesus is the bread sent from heaven by the Father to feed and sustain us. And in the supper Christ is made present to us by the Holy Spirit, so that while our bodies take the elements, our spirits feed on Christ. So, this supper is from the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, this supper reminds us of the gospel - Christ's broken body, and shed blood for our sins in our place. But it also reminds us that the gospel is Trinitarian - he was sent by the Father to *accomplish* redemption, and even now sends the Holy Spirit to *apply* redemption to us.

So let me pray, and we'll bring the servers up and we will distribute the elements.