

The Trinitarian Life of God, Part 1

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INTRODUCTION

I must say that I have not really had any desire to speak in this setting. That's not because of negative feelings about chapel or about all of you. Just that I don't think of myself as having a whole lot to say. As anyone who has taken my classes has discovered, I usually run out of substantive things to talk about around 4-5 weeks into the semester. I am painfully aware of this, of course, so when I received the invitation this past summer to speak in chapel, it came as a sort of frightening prospect. I immediately began to compose an email response listing several reasons why I must decline the kind invitation, but then I thought that perhaps I ought to wait a few days before responding with my regrets, just to make it look like I really had consulted my schedule before coming to the conclusion that I just couldn't do it.

A few days later, I was having lunch with my lovely wife on our porch and I mentioned to her, during a lull in the conversation, that I had been invited to speak in chapel and was, of course, planning to decline the invitation, but just hadn't yet come up with a good excuse. She responded by saying that she could understand why I might decline the invitation, noting that my life at Cedarville University has involved a sufficient amount of drama, but "what," she asked, "might I talk about *if* I were to accept the invitation?"

Well, I thought about that for a few minutes, enjoying my Panini sandwich, and said that if I were to accept the invitation, the only thing I could think to talk about would be the Trinity, since I have had something of a revolution in my own thinking about the Trinity over the last half-decade or so. I had always thought of the Trinity as one of those things that you're supposed to believe in but that has no practical value at all. You state it, and then move on – "Right, God is Three-in-one. Indeed, it is a mystery and we can't understand it. Now, let's move on and talk about . . ." -- fill in the blank with whatever else we regard as more relevant than God.

More recently, however, I have seen that this, to say the least, is quite far from a faithful understanding of things. After spending quite a bit of time over the last few years reading about and pondering the nature of the Trinitarian life of God, I have come to see that this basic conviction of the Christian faith is absolutely essential to understanding almost everything in Scripture, almost everything in Christian thought and practice, and almost everything about our experience in this world. Grasping the character of the Trinitarian life of God has direct relevance and radical and surprising implications for rightly understanding what it means to be human, the fall into sin, the nature of our corruption, the character of salvation, many of the things that Jesus did during his life on earth, many difficult passages in Scripture, the nature of friendship, marriage, sex, being a parent, being a child, watching television, team sports, conflict resolution, evangelism, conversation over coffee, video games, the mission of the Holy Spirit, Facebook, playing in a band, fast food, pornography, eating meals together, dating, divorce – just about everything

in life is affected by – and must be transformed by – thinking rightly about the Trinitarian life of God.

So, needless to say, I decided to accept the invitation to speak in chapel, and that is why today and Monday I plan to meditate with you on the topic of the Trinitarian life of God and how that provides the context for thinking about pretty much everything. I realize that that's a pretty bold statement, but I am confident that the more clearly we see our Triune God as He is revealed in Scripture, and the more we press that vision into every nook and corner of our lives, the more that God will fire our hearts with hope, and the more that God will open our eyes to envision new arenas of our lives for Him to invade and to bless, for the glory of His name by the power of His Spirit. Today and Monday, therefore, I want to hold up before all of us a vision of the Trinitarian life of God and what that means for us as Christian people existing in a Christian community, especially one that aims to look more and more like the Kingdom of Heaven every day, as Carl Ruby so often says.

I will first talk about the Trinitarian life of God both from the history of Christian thought and then from Scripture, and then show how this informs what it means for us to be human—our being created in the “image of God.” Then, I will demonstrate, all too briefly, how this provides the context for understanding so much in Scripture. Thirdly, I will provide just a handful of examples of how the Trinitarian life of God can become a lens through which we view our lives in this world, providing something of a critique of subtly destructive dynamics in our world and pointing the way toward more fruitful and life-giving paths. We will ponder together the Trinitarian life of God and shopping, the Trinitarian life of God and marriage, the Trinitarian life of God and Facebook, the Trinitarian life of God and pornography, the Trinitarian life of God and the pace of life at Cedarville University, and, finally, the Trinitarian life of God and navigating cultural and generational shifts at Cedarville University.

THE TRINITARIAN LIFE OF GOD

You may have noticed that I am using the phrase, “the Trinitarian life of God,” and not simply the term “the Trinity.” I am using this phrase very consciously and purposefully, because I want to do justice to the dynamic character of the life of God. We would all agree that God exists, of course, but we would all also agree that God does so much more than merely exist. In the same way, God is three-in-one, but there is so much more to the Triune life of God than that fact merely being true. I want to take us through the doctrinal truth to explore the reality to which it points, pressing into God and exploring the contours of His life—as much as is humanly possible. What is the life of God like? How do the Persons of the three-in-one God relate to one another? What do they think of each other? What is the posture of the Father toward the Son, and what do they talk about? How does God behave? If human community is to be modeled on the Trinity, as Jesus prays in John 17, then it is worth asking questions like these, and it is worth exploring the Trinitarian life of God.

So that is why I am speaking of the Trinitarian life of God and not merely the Trinity. We affirm and defend doctrinal formulations, but we are powerfully transformed by our reflection and meditation on the dynamic realities of the ways of God.

The Trinitarian Life of God from Christian Theology

Let's begin, then, with a bit of a theology lesson. I want to introduce to you this notion that is vital to understanding the Trinity – *perichoresis*. This is a word that the theologians of the early church used to talk about the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It comes from the roots “peri,” which means in and around, and forms words like “perimeter,” “peripatetic,” etc.; and “chore,” which indicates movement. We get words like “choreography” from this root. Early church theologians used this term to talk about the movement between the Persons of the Trinity into and around one another, and the basic meaning of this word *perichoresis* was “interpenetration.” That is, the Persons of the Trinity are always, from all eternity entering fully into one another. They are not merely with each other, standing near one another in a sort of static posture, at attention, ready for action, governing creation with stoic dispositions.

The Persons of the Trinity from all eternity are caught up in a relationship of interpenetration and envelopment. That is, each of the Persons of the Trinity is always going out to the other, always plunging deeply into the other, to know and to understand, to comprehend and to discover, and then to delight and rejoice in, to exult in the other's glories, beauties, perfections, and excellencies. And each member of the Trinity is always welcoming the other into Himself, to be fully known, to be discovered and comprehended, to be delighted in. The Trinity, then, is an eternal community of mutual delight.

Within God Himself, there is perfect vulnerability and complete openness. The Son is always welcoming the Father and the Spirit into Himself, laying Himself open to being fully known, knowing that the more the Father and Spirit see Him and all that He is clearly, the more they will delight and exult with overflowing and overpowering joy. And the Son is always going out into the Father and the Spirit, plunging deeply into the far reaches of all that they are, always knowing their character, their thoughts, their plans, their dreams. And the Son is always delighting in the Father and the Spirit, always rejoicing in them and with them, always exulting with abounding joy.

The Trinity is not a static reality, not a committee that just needs to get the job done, or that is merely available but not doing a whole lot more. Within the central reality of all of creation itself—within the one true and only God who is Himself the Creator—there is this ongoing relationship of mutual discovery, welcome, hospitality, and eternally ever-increasing joy and delight.

Think about how infinitely different that is from our experience. There is no fear of the other, no suspicion, no worry that the others will find out something that would make them recoil with disgust or disappointment. No worry that if the others find out more, they'll end up searching for someone more interesting. We work pretty hard every day to make sure that we avoid the pain that comes from ridicule or disappointment or disapproval, right? It's such a routine part of our lives that we don't even notice! We match our clothing, checking ourselves in the mirror to make sure we're put together just so. We get new outfits to impress one another. We worry that we'll have a bad hair day, or that the freshman fifteen will be a bit more obvious than the day before. When someone says, “hey, you look really nice today,” we don't take that as a compliment and let it fill us with confidence . . . What do we do!? We worry about how we've looked for the past two weeks!! What does she mean!? Have I looked like a slob until today!?

We worry about others' opinions. We want the approval of others. We want to be noticed and appreciated. We want to be thought of as being interesting, as someone that you'd really want to get to know. The outlet for this, as we'll talk about on Monday, is, of course, Facebook. "I'm doing something really quirky and interesting right now!" "I'm a really unique snowflake!" Even those who say, "I don't care what people think of me," spend time making sure that they've nailed the "I don't care what people think of me" look.

But among the Persons of the Trinity there is none of that. They are each eager to be known for who they are, having every confidence that the more they are truly discovered, the more that will result in white hot and absolutely pure love and delight. Wouldn't you love just a taste of that reality?

The Trinitarian Life of God from Scripture

As I said, the dynamic relationality within God was a notion that was developed by the church fathers, but where do we see this in Scripture? We are, of course, evangelical people who take our cues for doctrine and life from Scripture, not so much from tradition. So, what passages did they dwell upon in order to come up with this dynamic relationality always going on within God Himself? This is not an exhaustive survey, but let's look at a few Scripture passages that give us brief glimpses of the Trinitarian life of God.

John 1:1

In John 1:1, we get this very familiar statement, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God." As we know, John is talking about Jesus, who was with God from all eternity. The expression that John uses when he says that "the Word" (Jesus) was "with God," is very important. He does not merely note that Jesus is alongside the Father from all eternity, sort of in God's hip pocket, or in the general vicinity of God, or perhaps to the side of God's throne, ready to do God's bidding should He be called upon to do so. Jesus is not a lesser deity or some other creation of God who happens to be there "with God" for all eternity. That is an early church notion that was dismissed as heresy at the Council of Nicea. There are other Greek phrases and words that could have been used to indicate this. But John uses a very distinct phrase to talk about Jesus' being with the Father from all eternity. He writes that Jesus was *pros ton Theon*. This expression indicates a relationship of equality, with Jesus standing face to face with God from all eternity. He was with God, having the same status as God Himself, or perhaps it can be said like this – He was, from all eternity, fully participating in the reality and identity of God Himself. "He was with God and He was God."

It is vital that we understand what is happening here along these lines. This phrase points to the posture of the Father in relation to the Son, and the Son in relation to the Father—God the Father and God the Son are beholding each other, face to face, with complete love and full delight and joy from all eternity.

Let that sit with you for a moment. Father and Son gazing upon each other, fully delighting in one another, rejoicing in one another's glories and excellencies from all eternity. Who does that? What kind of relationship do you have with another person so that you behave in this way, beholding the other's face for a long period of time—like, forever? Pretty intimate, wouldn't you say?

It's actually very difficult to do this, isn't it? In Jr Hi we have "staring contests," where we see how long we can do it before one person just can't take it any longer, either bursting out laughing or just getting so weirded out that you've got to stop. It's hard to look at another person for too long before we feel very uncomfortable! We feel self-conscious! This is a sort of unique intimacy, one that never tires of beholding the other's face, and one that never tires of being gazed upon!

If you want to experiment with this, remember this the next time you're riding an elevator. What is proper elevator etiquette? It's a pretty exceptional time in life when you're stuck with a handful of strangers for a few moments doing nothing but standing there in a very close and confined space. It can be very awkward. And what are we supposed to do? You stand there, hands folded, staring at the numbers as they light up, or staring at the ground, lips pursed, putting on the "I'm thinking about something very deeply, so don't bother me" posture, hoping no one touches you . . ., or says something uncomfortable.

Next time you're in an elevator, try this—turn around and face someone, stand with an earnest posture and begin to study that person. Gaze into their face and study the contours of their features. And make some noises! Stare . . . "ooh," . . . "aah." . . ., hmmm..., I see. Ooh, that's a bit of a shock! Hmm . . . a bit unfortunate about the nose, eh?

Or, try the reverse. Grab someone by the arm and direct their attention to your face and your dress, your hair . . ., "what do you think?" "Do you see what I've done here, what I'm trying to project? Any thoughts?"

You wouldn't do that, would you? Why not? It would take absolute trust, wouldn't it? We're afraid and suspicious of someone studying us because of what they might do with that knowledge. Or we're afraid of them finding out certain things, worried about someone truly knowing us and seeing our faults, our imperfections. The prospect that someone else would know us fully and truly and come away disappointed, or disgusted, or shocked . . . the possibility of being rejected is so crushing that we just can't bring ourselves to be vulnerable before others. And even with those with whom we're very close, it's sometimes hard to sustain eye-contact because of guilt, or because there are some complications in the relationship that neither person really knows how to get at and untangle.

But we're in an infinitely different condition than God, and the Father and the Son have a radically different relationship with one another than that between any two humans, even between husband and wife who have been married for decades. Of course there was an all-too-brief moment in human history when we did have this sort of trust and intimacy – in the garden. But since then we've learned to protect ourselves from the hurt that usually goes along with intimacy and vulnerability.

But within the Trinity there is trust. The Father and the Son know that the more the other knows and sees, the more delight they will both enjoy. And the more that each opens up to the other, the more intense the exultation in one another's excellencies. Total intimacy, perfect delight, eternal rejoicing in the beauties and glories of the other. You can sense the anticipation in Jesus' prayer in John 17, the eagerness to return to the Father to enjoy once again that intimacy: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." This relationship of "glory together with" that sets God utterly apart from any other reality.

John 17

Well, not only are Father and Son gazing upon one another in an eternal face-to-face encounter, but there is an interpenetration that occurs. That is, the Father fully enters the Son and the Son fully enters the Father. In John 17 we have what we call “Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer,” where He prays not only for those disciples present with Him, but for all those who will ever be His disciples. This is verses 20-23:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In this passage Jesus speaks about an outrageous sort of intimacy that is somewhat understandable but also so completely beyond comprehension. There is this interpenetration so that the Son and the Father go into one another, welcome one another into themselves, envelope each other, but also retain their own identities. This is intimacy that is very definitely not possible in human experience. Nobody talks like this. I’m very close with my father, and I’m very close with my sons. They tell me that I embarrass them because I’m always kissing them with big sloppy kisses in front of their friends. But even we don’t talk like this. This is an unparalleled sort of intimacy.

What’s interesting in John 17, and we see this in a few other passages, especially throughout Paul’s letters, is that we as redeemed humanity have perichoresis with God. Jesus says that we are “in God” and that Jesus Himself is “in us,” so we are caught up into the Trinitarian love of God as part of God’s great salvation. God is in us, we are in God, just as Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus. There is this intense interpenetration and envelopment that is going on—and we’re part of it! But we don’t have this same thing with each other. Humans don’t enter into each other—except in the sexual relationship that husband and wife enjoy. This is one instance in which humans can’t quite mimic the reality that God enjoys as Father, Son, and Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:10-11

Let me just mention one more passage—1 Corinthians 2:10-11. Paul says:

For to us God revealed these things through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

So here we have the Spirit participating in this dynamic relationality within God, searching out the deep things of God.

These, then, are just a few of the Scripture passages that point to the intense relationality going on within the life of the one true God. God is not a static reality, but a dynamic, relational reality. God is an eternal community of mutual delight. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always entering, always welcoming, always delighting. Because of this, there is an eternity of rich theological freight that is carried by these wonderful words that we so often throw around without realizing how much they mean to God—hospitality, delight, relationship, *perichoresis*.

THE TRINITARIAN LIFE OF GOD AND HUMANITY AS THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Trinitarian life of God is essential for rightly understanding what it means to be human. According to Genesis 1-2, Adam is made in the image of God, which means that each individual human is a unique bearer of God's image, having dignity and value. But Genesis goes on to say that Adam and Eve, together, are made in the image of God, indicating that the image of God is also a communal notion. Together, Adam and Eve are called upon to mimic the Trinitarian life of God—that dynamic interchange and mutual delight that has been going on within God for all eternity. That dynamic provides the pattern for how humanity is supposed to relate to one another.

This is seen, of course, in Genesis 2 where Adam and Eve are naked and feel no shame. There is complete vulnerability, total openness to one another in a context of absolute trust. There is nothing to hide from the other's gaze, no reason to cover one's body, since there is no suspicion of the other, no cause for fear. This is actually normal human existence—the availability to get to know one another, to be discovered, to be gazed upon and delighted in by each other and to enjoy one another fully and in every way. And of course this is physically performed in the bodily design for man and woman to physically become one just as they become one in every other way.

Humans, therefore, are essentially relational. This is not some sort of optional part of the package of what it means to be human, as if the really important things are to be producers and consumers—relationality is at the very core of who we are. We are made to know truly and to be fully and truly known. We are designed by God to go outside of ourselves, to search others out, to discover others, to plunge deeply within others and to draw them out so that we might come to know and understand and to delight in them. And God intended for us to be known, to tell our stories, to share everything about ourselves, so that others might come to delight and rejoice in all that we are.

This is the biblical vision of God's design for us as humans! And there's a sense in which we all know this existentially, don't we? We all have an intense desire to know another and to be known by another, and we all have a desire for that one special person to whom we can reveal the deep recesses of our hearts, and from whom we long to hear those words, "I love you, I love you." "I choose you, from among all the others." We especially want to hear this from someone who has already discovered all the contradictions, the confusions, the bizarre and messed up corners of our souls. One who has already found out all the things we've done, the things that have been done to us. There is nothing else in human experience that can compare to being fully and completely known and unconditionally loved by another. That longing to be known and treasured is a God-given longing, something inherent to our being human.

Sadly, this is quite far from our experience of human existence and there were really only two people who ever knew life to be like this—and for them it didn't last too long. Because of sin, every relationship has been distorted and perverted, and Adam and Eve begin to do things that are completely unprecedented and totally unnatural for humans in their being in the image of God. Just after the fall into sin, they hide—this is not normal!! They hide from God and from one another. They cover themselves! There is now shame in nakedness. There is now fear and suspicion. They've got to cover themselves because they can no longer trust each other. "If Eve sees me and knows me, she'll hurt me!" "I can't trust Adam! I can't let him get any leverage in this relationship!"

Adam and Eve now use their knowledge against one another . . . so they hide themselves, both physically and emotionally. We've been doing that ever since, haven't we...?

There is now self-preservation, with Adam blaming Eve, hoping that she will take the fall for what has happened. Adam no longer tries to feel sympathy with Eve, trying to understand how Eve is affected by what has happened—forget that! He'd rather see her go down in flames! This is so perverted – here we have the first instance of a human being actually relishing the prospect of another person's destruction. You ever done that? "Hope she gets what's coming to her! She deserves it, look what she did!"

I've been reading over and pondering this tragic episode in Genesis 3 and the ugliness of it has weighed more and more on me. Notice what Adam does here – he doesn't blame Eve to her face, does he? He does something far more sinister. He sells her out before God. This is, more or less, the first instance of destructive gossip, of accusation to a third party!

Have you ever had this happen to you – have you ever been betrayed by a friend? Have you ever had a trusted friend shame you in public or hurt you deeply in order to gain popularity among others? You trusted this friend and have shared intimate knowledge, and that trust is betrayed. They shared what is incredibly valuable to you in order to gain a treasured status for themselves. And they treat as cheap what you feel is precious. That sort of violation destroys friendships irretrievably.

Now, can you imagine what it must have been like for that to happen for the first time ever!/? You're not just figuratively "naked" and laid bare, you're actually naked! Adam and Eve had let themselves be physically, spiritually, and emotionally explored by one another, they've shared everything, nothing at all was off-limits. And now they've turned on one another, naming one another as "the reason things are so messed up." Intense betrayal.

But our current experience of being human is not normal, and our relationships often bring us intense pain. We were designed by God, because we are in the image of the three-in-one God, to be *perichoretic*, to mimic the Trinitarian life of God, to fully know others, and to be known by others. We were made to send out our hearts to others, to have ourselves fully explored and understood, and to be delighted in and treasured. And we were made to fully explore others, to take in the unspeakable richnesses of others, and to delight in them.

Well, as we learn in Scripture, salvation has to do with restoring what has been lost, with God setting out to fix what has been broken. And what was lost was humanity's enjoying its role as the image of God, and this is what God sets about to restore in salvation—God creating new people, and a new people through the death and resurrection

of Christ and forming them into communities that resemble the Trinitarian life of God on earth. That's what the church is all about. It is not the haven for all the saved people to wall themselves off from the world and from each other. But the restored and the being restored people who are claimed by God to begin re-learning what it is to be human, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

On Monday, I want to show how this vision is found throughout Scripture, and then I want to apply this Trinitarian-shaped vision of humanity to a range of dynamics that we find in our culture.

Let's pray: Oh God who is the Father of Jesus, we praise you for the love into which you have brought us, through all that Jesus has done and does for us. Give us grace, by Your Spirit, to walk in truth; give us grace to truly mimic the life that you share, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that our community would make it obvious that You sent Jesus into the world and have raised Him from the dead. Amen.