**THEOLOGY MATTERS**

THE TRINITY

**Groundwork**

Theology Matters is intended to create a safe space for intentional dialogue amongst church members concerning our core beliefs. These gatherings will consult the expertise of others but will ultimately submit to the Scriptures. It is also important that we foster the appropriate spirit to have these conversations. With each gathering we commit to the following idea:

Christians are commanded to love each other despite differences of race, gender, privilege, and social, political and economic background, and to be of one mind wherever possible. We know that divisions among Christians hinder our witness in the world, and we desire greater mutual understanding and truth-speaking in love. We know too that as trustees of God’s revealed truth we cannot embrace any form of doctrinal indifferentism, or relativism, or pluralism by which God’s truth is sacrificed for a false peace. Doctrinal disagreements call for debate. Dialogue for mutual understanding and, if possible, narrowing of the differences is valuable, doubly so when **the avowed goal is unity in primary things, with liberty in secondary things and charity in all things**. - (Donald Bloesch)

**The Trinity**

*Common Analogies*:

Throughout history various analogies have been used to help explain the concept of the Trinity. Popular examples include the egg (shell, yoke and egg-white), apple (skin, flesh and seeds), clover (three leafs in one plant), water (liquid, solid and gas), rainbow (water, light and reflection), and roles (husband, father, son).

While analogies can be helpful, they are always limited and if we aren’t careful the wrong analogy can promote heretical ideas. Consequently, we don’t recommend using analogies when trying to explain the Trinity, rather we encourage using the Scriptures to convey the concept to others (more on this later).

*The History of the Debate:*

The Church began struggling with explaining the Trinity very early. With our roots in Judaism, Christians were monotheistic but questions concerning the deity of Jesus caused others to assume Christianity was polytheistic, meaning we worshipped multiple gods. It seemed the only way to truly be monotheistic was to deny the divinity of Christ. When the divinity of Christ was called into question so was also the divinity of the Spirit.

The early debates led to the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 fully affirming the divinity of Christ and the Spirit. The key point being that from 381 the Church unequivocally affirmed the full divinity of the Trinity.

Eventually, questions about the nature of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit emerged. The Cappodocian Fathers utilized key terms to say that God is of one essence but three independent parts. Subordination can exist in order but not in essence. The focus of the relationship led to different branches of the Church to emphasize different aspects of the Trinity. The Eastern Church focused on the distinct persons of the Trinity, highlighting the communal aspect of God’s nature. The Western Church emphasized the oneness of God and the authority He carried. Consequently, the East often felt the West was diminishing the divinity of Jesus and the Spirit and risked sounding like they supported the heresy of modalism (God reveals Himself in different modes and is never three in one at the same time). The West, however, felt the East over-emphasize the three independent realities and flirted with the heresy of Tritheism (three distinct gods). With these tensions the Church became susceptible to greater division.

At the Third Council of Toledo in 589 AD the Western Church added the word *filioque* to the Nicene Creed. *Filioque* literally means “and from the Son.” Its addition changed the creed from saying the Spirit proceeded from the Father to now saying, “and from the Son.” In 867 the Eastern Church accused the West of tampering with an ecumenical creed and the Church suffered one of the most significant splits in Christian History.

The debates concerning the Trinity ultimately fade into the background of Church history. The twentieth century Theologians Karl Barth and Karl Rhaner bring it back to the forefront of theological discussion. Today, the Trinity remains a critical concept for all believers to know and understand.

**Main Points**

*Divinity of All Three*

The greatest risk in discussing the Trinity is to embrace an idea that Jesus or the Spirit are less than divine. Scripture clearly teaches the divinity of all three and Church history has affirmed this belief since 381 AD. It is a core and primary teaching of the Church.

But why is that important? If we deny the divinity of Jesus then His death does not achieve salvation. If Jesus is simply human then he is not a perfect, sinless sacrifice. He is like all of us who have sinned and fall short. However, if He is divine then it preserves His sinless nature and makes salvation possible. The divinity of Jesus is consistently affirmed in Scripture and to deny his divinity is to deny the authority of Scripture. As Athanasius stated, the divinity of the Spirit is equally important because it is by the Spirit we receive the seal of salvation and commune with God. **So, when discussing or wrestling with the Trinity, the most important consideration is to affirm the divinity of Father, Son and Spirit.** We must also see God as three in one. We must not assume there are three distinct Gods but preserve His oneness.

*Use the Scriptures!!!!!!!!*

As important as it is to consult history and read the work of other theologians, our goal is not to memorize these historical details or create a clever analogy. We must consult the Scriptures. When wrestling with the Trinity or the need to explain it to someone else, go to the text. There are numerous passages that point to the concept of the Trinity. Here are a few clear examples:

Matthew 3:16-17

16As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

* Here we see the distinctive persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit) all at once. They are not separate modes where they cease to exist at the same time.

John 14:25-26

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

* This passage helps us see all three persons of the Trinity from another perspective. The Son has revealed the Father. Similarly, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit will come to teach and remind us all that Jesus has said.

Matthew 28:18-19

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

* The Baptismal formula puts all three persons of the Trinity on equal footing. One is not lesser than the other. Equally important is the fact that each play a role in the work of salvation.

*Learn How to Think Not What to Think*

It is so important that we aren’t afraid of difficult concepts that we see presented in the Scriptures. Through prayer, consultation of expertise and through discussion with other believers we can learn how to submit to the text.

*The Importance of Salvation*

When we are discussing Father, Son and Holy Spirit … moreover the activity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit we are talking about salvation. Consider this quote from Donald Bloesch, “Salvation is a Trinitarian reality, initiated by the Father, implemented by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit.” I’m not asking our church to be experts on explaining the concept of the Trinity. I’m striving to make sure we understand the Saving work that is initiated by the Father, implemented by the Son and applied by the Holy Spirit.

**The Distinct Persons of the Trinity**

In our statement of Our Beliefs we intend to affirm the following points. These examples below are still being revised and edited but they give a glimpse of our attempt to describe the importance of each member of the Trinity.

*God the Creator of All*

**Core Belief:** We believe God is the eternal, perfect, personal Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of the universe. He is the only true God. He is one in His essence but has revealed Himself to humanity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:1, 26; Exod. 3:14; Deut. 6:4; Ps. 19:1; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14)

*Jesus, the Son of God*

**Core Belief:** We believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is fully God and fully man. He lived a sinless human life. He was crucified on the cross for the sins of humanity, resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. His life, teachings, death, and resurrection offer the only true hope for all people. (Matt. 1:18-23; John 1:14; 3:16; 14:6; Acts 1:11; Rom. 5:6-8; 1 Cor. 15:3-4, 20-21)

*The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God*

**Core Belief:** We believe the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. He convicts people of sin and draws them to Jesus. He indwells believers and seals them for eternity. He enlightens and empowers believers to understand spiritual truth, to do what is right, and to reflect Christ-like character. He gives believers gifts to serve God in and through His church. (John 6:44; 14:16-17; 16:7-14; Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; 12:4-11; Eph. 1:13-14; Gal. 5:22-23)

**Key Terms & Individuals (listed in a rough chronological order):**

Monarchians – feared the deification of Jesus threatened monotheism

Dynamic Monarchians - Jesus is a carrier of divine power

Modalistic Monarchians (Modalism) – “modes” through which one being expresses himself. Once He chooses one mode He ceases to be the others.

* **Sabellius** – an individual who argued for sequential expressions or different modes (OT reveals the era of the Father; the Gospels reveal the era of the Son; The Church and present day reveals the era of the Spirit).
* **Key Problem –** When God became Jesus He ceased being God since He had changed modes. The crucifixion then equates to a full killing of God.

Tritheism – Accentuates the three persons of the Trinity. Denies the oneness of God and becomes polytheism.

Origen – Key figure who argues for the eternal generation of the Son. This protects the divinity of Christ by saying He has existed in eternity with the Father.

Arius – wanting to protect the uniqueness of God, he argues the “begetting” or “making” of the Son. Therefore, Jesus is not eternal. Problem now is that Jesus is no longer divine. He is created rather than the Creator. He also argued the Spirit was the creation of the Son. Both are direct violations of Scripture.

Athanasius – Frequently defends the triune God. Responds to Arius by saying If Jesus is not divine then we are not saved. Responds to questions of the Spirit’s divinity by arguing that the Spirit is put on equal footing with the Father and the Son. If the Spirit that enters our hearts is not the actual Spirit of God then we have no true community with God.

Council at Nicea in 325 – centered on the deity of the Son or the divinity of Christ. The church unequivocally affirmed the full divinity of Christ

Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 - Church fully affirms the divinity of the Spirit. The key implication being that from 381 onward, orthodox Christianity views Father, Son, and Spirit as fully divine.

Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus) – Begin to work on explaining the *relationship* between the Father, Son and Spirit. They develop critical terms: ousia – essence; and hypostasis – independent reality. Their statement is God is one ousia but three hypostasis. There can be subordination in order but not in essence.

Filioque – literally means “and from the Son.” Was added to the Nicene Creed in 589 to help explain the procession of the Spirit. The revision made the creed read, “The Spirit proceeds from the Father, and from the Son.” The Eastern Church disagreed with this addition, which is what led to a major controversy and ultimate division in 867.