

Only the Triune God Saves

In February my oldest daughter had twins and one of them she named Mikayla Trinity. It is not uncommon these days for girls to be called Trinity. Some of you know that the central female character in the Matrix movies was named Trinity. The name Trinity is shorthand for Tri-unity. The *tri* bit or prefix means "three", as in *triangle* or *tricycle*, so Tri-unity means "the unity of three" or "three who are one."

In the Matrix movies the central character is Neo, or if you like, "New Man", played by Keanu Reeves. Neo, this New Man, is the hope of an imprisoned humanity. At one point Neo dies and is brought back to life when Trinity kisses him. Whether intended or not, this illustrates the fundamental point I want to make today: **A non-Trinitarian God cannot save us.** A God who is only a simple mathematical unity cannot save us. The Trinity is the only hope of saving humanity from its imprisonment to sin and death.

In coming to grips with this truth consider how Peter's first letter begins:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
 To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia,
 and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification
 of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.
 May grace and peace be multiplied to you.
 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 1:1-3a).

In verse 2 Peter brings together three persons and ascribes to each of these three persons a different role in effecting the salvation of those described as "elect exiles." The "elect exiles" are simply Christians scattered over various nations in the ancient world. Peter begins his letter by acknowledging that the salvation of Christians is due to the cooperative work of God the Father, the Spirit and Jesus Christ, the Trinity. At this point let me re-emphasise: **A non-Trinitarian God cannot save us.**

The nub of the issue is this:

- (1) Man, that is, people, can only be saved by a perfect man.
- (2) It is impossible for sinful humanity to produce a perfect man.
- (3) The only solution is for God to become the perfect man who alone can save us.
- (4) But a man is not omniscient, not omnipotent and not omnipresent.
- (5) Unless there is more than one person in the Godhead it is impossible for God to become man and still be an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God.

We must not think of God as someone who is remote and distant, "out there"; someone who is passively waiting for us to discover him, like the Loch Ness monster or some sea monster lurking in the hidden depths of the ocean. God doesn't wait for us to discover him. He takes the initiative and he does so as a Trinitarian God. God the Father foreknew or predestined those who would be his people before the creation of the universe. God the Holy Spirit worked in your life to cause you to belong to God. Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the one you obey, the one with whose blood you are sprinkled, meaning that you are marked out as someone whose sins have been dealt with, someone who is forgiven.

I repeat: **A non-Trinitarian God cannot save us.** There are many who think it is preposterous to speak of one God as Trinity. To them we are playing with words. As

Hodgson observes, "The idea of unity in our minds is primarily an arithmetical idea: the criterion of unity is the absence of multiplicity." Islam is a classic illustration of applying this simplistic mathematical understanding of unity to God. Muhammad, being ill-informed about Christianity, believed the Trinity was God the Father, Mary and Jesus. He assumed that calling Jesus the Son of God implied God the Father had had sex with Mary. Also in the Qur'an the ultimate heresy is to believe in anything but God as a simple mathematical unity. To Muslims $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ and, therefore, for us to claim God is Triune is really to say there are three gods.

The Jews have a limited understanding of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament. In John 10, when Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one*" his Jewish compatriots picked up stones to kill him. Jesus asked them for which of his Father-enabled miracles they were going to stone him. They replied, "*We are not stoning you for any of these, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God*" (John 10:33). The Jews like the Muslims drawing on a limited understanding of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament, could only think of God in strict mathematical terms.

It is only in Christianity, Judaism and Islam that an absolute, personal God is to be found. Many gods worshiped by the Greeks, Romans and other ancient peoples, were personal gods. But they were not absolute, just much more powerful than humans. In Hinduism Brahman is absolute but not personal. In Buddhism the ultimate enlightened being, a Buddha, is evacuated of individuality. Biblical revelation alone makes the personal primary and the impersonal secondary. All impersonal things in the universe are there because they were created by the Only Absolute Person, God. All non-biblical ways of thinking make the impersonal primary and the personal secondary. So atheists believe that even persons are the product of impersonal causes and processes.

A non-Trinitarian God cannot save us. For Muslims Allah is utterly transcendent. You cannot have a personal relationship with Allah. In Revelation 22:4 we are told that when we enter Paradise that we will see the face of God, just as Jesus promised, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*" (Mt 5:8). In the Qur'an Paradise is not a place where you see Allah and walk and talk with him. Muslims need to understand that such a God cannot save them. As the Bible reveals, sin is of such horrendous proportions that we are totally incapable of saving ourselves, which is what Muslims are trying so futilely to do. Our God *has* taken the initiative when "*the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.*" After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven he sent the Holy Spirit to live in our lives. In explaining the staggering significance of this Jesus said, "*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him*" (Jn 14:23). If God's Spirit is in you then God the Father and Jesus have come and made their home with you.

Imagine one day I attempt to teach Mikayla what her second name means. I tell her the Father is God; that the Son is God; that the Holy Spirit is God. Yet I insist there is only one God. By this time Mikayla will have learned that $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$. If the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God then that makes three gods, doesn't it? How do I help her to avoid the error of Muslims and to see that when we speak of God's unity we are speaking of complex unity, not a simple mathematical unity.

How about this? The sun gives out heat and light. The sun is not the same as the heat. The sun is not the same as the light. But the sun is united with the heat and the light it gives out. In the same way the Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the same as the Son. The Father is not the same as the Holy Spirit. But the Father is united with the Son and the Holy Spirit he sends.

Using this dangerous example encourages Mikayla to develop an heretical view as to who God is, a heresy called Subordinationism, the view that just as heat and light are subordinate to the sun so the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father. By contrast, the Bible teaches that Father, Son and Spirit are co-eternal and co-equal. Remember what Jesus prayed in John 17:5: *"And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."*

Perhaps I might tell Mikayla the Trinity is like an ice cube in boiling water. Ice is solid, the water is liquid and the steam is gas but they are all H₂O. All three things are separate, but they are all the same thing and all at the same time in the same place. In the same way, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separate persons but they are all God and all at the same time in that which is God.

By this dangerous example I encourage Mikayla to develop another heretical view of God, which we call modalism or Sabellianism. The Father is not one mode or form God can take, with the Son and Spirit being two other modes. God is three persons, not forms. Besides, we certainly don't want Mikayla to think that Jesus might melt.

Some suggest God is like an egg. The yolk, whites and shell are 3 in 1. But God is not like an egg because you can throw away one part and still have an egg. You can't do that with God. The Bible teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have the same nature, something the heretic Arius denied. Note that the shell, the white and the yolk do not have the same nature - try eating the shell.

Some think the Trinity is like a three-handled basket or bowl with say a bouquet of flowers in it. The basket represents the one God, the three handles the three persons of God and the flowers or contents the one essence shared by the three persons. That's clever, but this example breaks down too because the three handles are only part of the basket or bowl. To speak of God's Tri-unity is not to speak of just one aspect of what it means for him to be God.

How about this attempt? Take Mikayla into a room. Turn off the lights and plunge the room in darkness. Hold three thin lighted candles in your hand in such a way that it appears to Mikayla as though there is only one candle glowing in your hand. Then separate them to show there are in fact three candles. But in this case they *are* three candles, not one candle, only *appearing* to be so.

I know many Christians do use examples like this, even Christians for whom we have considerable respect. But I would urge you: **Do not use any of these illustrations to explain the Trinity.**

19th century theologian Tryon Edwards observed, "Mystery is another name for our ignorance; if we were omniscient, all would be perfectly plain." It is healthier for Mikayla and for you and me just to accept our ignorance and recognize that we are

dealing with a mystery which is quite simply beyond us. There is absolutely nothing in our human experience that can begin to help us to understand this wonderful mystery. So stop trying. Remember God created us in his image. We do not create God in our image. Because we are like God in some respects, knowing God helps us to know ourselves. But we are only like God in *some* respects. God is still immensely different in many, many ways. So it is presumptuous of us to think that God, the creator of immense complexity in this universe and, therefore, the most complex being in the universe, has a personhood that corresponds to personhood as *we* experience it.

If I shouldn't use illustrations to explain the Trinity how do I teach Mikayla? By teaching her the answers to two questions. In the *Westminster Confession Shorter Catechism*, question 5 asks: "Are there more Gods than one?" The answer is very simple: "There is but one only, the living and true God." Question 9 in the Larger Catechism asks: "How many persons are there in the Godhead?" The answer is this: "There [are] three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy [Spirit]; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties."

In 1 Peter 1:2 we see how each member of the Godhead contributes to our salvation:

God the Father	Foreknowledge
The Spirit	Sanctification
Jesus Christ	Lordship and sprinkling with his blood

The magnificence of Boticelli's famous painting of the Trinity is that his understanding of the Trinity centres on the cross. This is also the window Peter swings open. Peter uses language drawn from Exodus 24. God had just given his people Israel the Ten Commandments. After Moses told them all that God had said we are told that "*all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do'*" (v3). Then Moses took the Book of the Covenant, centering on the Ten Commandments, and read it to the people, reminding them of their pledge to obey the Lord. Next we read that Moses sprinkled the blood of sacrificed animals on the people saying, "*Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words'*" (v8).

Peter re-applies this language to Jesus. In Exodus 24 the covenant made on Mount Sinai is a covenant to obey God. The sprinkling of blood upon the people is the sign that they are now God's people. For Peter Jesus IS God, so now you and I are in a new covenant relationship with God. This involves obeying Jesus because he *is* God. This time the sign that we are now God's people is not that our bodies are sprinkled with animal blood but that our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. Indeed, at 1 Peter 2:3, quoting Psalm 34:8, Christians are those who "*have tasted that the Lord is good.*" Of course, in Psalm 34 this is speaking about God. But here Peter is speaking about Jesus, the "living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious." In other words, Jesus IS God and we have tasted his goodness.

At the very outset of his letter, then, Peter is indicating to us that God's personhood is complex. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is God, the Spirit is God and Jesus is God. But they are distinct persons, each of whom has a distinct part to play in our salvation. The Father set his heart in love upon us before the creation of the universe. The Spirit sets us apart to belong to God. We obey Jesus as our God and are God's

people because of the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. Only such a Trinitarian God can save you. Treasure the wonder of who God is!