

Session Four

The Trinity

Trinity: What It Is...What It Isn't



Christianity never treats us like babies, or like mindless people who should be told what to do because we can't figure out anything for ourselves.

Christianity calls us to use our highest and best abilities—to strive, to question, to explore, to be intellectually and emotionally honest. But we are also called to realize that God is too great to be mastered by our human minds. He asks us to come closer, always closer, to him not by “figuring out” what and who he is, but by loving him and living a life that offers love to everyone.

Knowing by Experience

The teaching that God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is not something we can “figure out” or really wrap our minds around. And the church doesn't tell us that we should try. The Trinity is not an idea thought up by scholars, or simply a convenient way for us to look at God. Rather, it's the way God makes himself known to human beings. People who love God enough to spend a good deal of their time in prayer and thinking about God have *experienced* him as Trinity.

For example in *Nehemiah 9:30*, the writer addresses God the Father and talks about “your Spirit.” Sometimes even a pagan recognizes the presence of the Spirit in another person. In *Genesis 41:38* the Pharaoh of Egypt—certainly not a believer in the God of Israel—acknowledges Joseph as a man who has the “Spirit of God” in him.

You remember from an earlier lesson the cynical Nathaniel (Bartholomew), who in spite of his cynicism recognized Jesus as the divine Son of God (*John 1:48-49*). Some other very cynical people—the soldiers at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified—also experienced Jesus as the Son of God (read *Mark 15:37-39*). Nothing forced them or intellectually convinced them of who he was—they just knew from experiencing him as he was.

As for God the Father, the Bible has many stories of people who have experienced God's fatherly love, authority, and creative power. All these experiences are what we mean when we say that we know God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—because that is the experience of people who have encountered God in faith.

What God is Not

Lots of people have mistaken ideas about what it means that God is Trinity. Let's take a look at some things that God is not:



1. God is not a creator (the Father) and two created beings (the Son and the Holy Spirit). The Son of God and the Holy Spirit are not created beings. Like the Father they are divine, they have always existed, and they act with the Father in creating all that exists. Look at the Nicene Creed in your Divine Liturgy pew book, pages 18 and 19. Find words in the creed describing Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit which tell us that they are not created beings. Write the words here:

2. God is *not* one person in three "forms." The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are persons. Look again at the creed and write some words that tell us Jesus Christ came to us as a real person:

3. God is not three separate gods. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so perfectly united in their nature and will that they are one. Yet in this one there are three distinct persons who do particular things. For example, the Son died on the cross, but the Holy Spirit did not. The Holy Spirit came down on the apostles at Pentecost, but the Father did not. Yet these were actions of God, the one and undivided God. Obviously we are not the first people in history who have had trouble understanding all this. Just after the creed is the *anathema* (recited by the deacon)—a condemnation of wrong beliefs about the Trinity that some people insisted on adhering to in the time the creed was formulated. What words in the *anathema* tell you that some people believed the Son and the Holy Spirit were created beings? Write the words here:

Finally, look at the *doxology* (words glorifying God recited by the priest) that follows the *anathema*. These words of St. Gregory first refer to God as "him" (the one God) and then to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the three persons who are the one God). Here, in a nutshell, is our belief about the Trinity.

Meeting the Holy Spirit

If someone were to ask you "Which person of the Trinity do you know the least about?" what would be your answer? For most of us it would probably be the Holy Spirit.

Yet the Bible tells us quite a bit about this third person of the Trinity. Let's look at what the Bible has to say. Find the passages listed below, and choose the numbered phrase that best describes each one. Put the letter of the Bible reference by the phrase.



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| _____ 1. Not everyone receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit. | a. <i>Micah 3:5-8</i> |
| _____ 2. The Holy Spirit teaches us how to pray. | b. <i>1 John 4:1-2</i> |
| _____ 3. It's possible for us to hurt the Holy Spirit. | c. <i>Psalms 104:30</i> |
| _____ 4. The Holy Spirit speaks to us. | d. <i>1 Corinthians 2:14</i> |
| _____ 5. The Holy Spirit loves. | e. <i>1 Corinthians 12:3</i> |
| _____ 6. The Holy Spirit is everywhere, all the time. | f. <i>Romans 8:26</i> |
| _____ 7. The Holy Spirit empowers those who do God's will. | g. <i>Ephesians 4:30</i> |
| _____ 8. The Holy Spirit gives comfort. | h. <i>Romans 15:30</i> |
| _____ 9. The Holy Spirit takes part in creation. | i. <i>Acts 8:29</i> |
| _____ 10. The unforgivable sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit. | j. <i>Psalms 51:10-12</i> |
| _____ 11. If someone curses Christ, that person does not have the Holy Spirit. | k. <i>Psalms 139:7-12</i> |
| _____ 12. Not every spirit is the Holy Spirit. | l. <i>Matthew 12:31-32</i> |
| _____ 13. We can pray for God to give us the Holy Spirit. | m. <i>Acts 9:31</i> |

The Prayer Over the Water (from *The Order of Baptism*)

O Lord, you have created by your great power the sea and the dry land and all the creatures therein. You have sent your holy apostles, giving them the order to preach to all nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You have also decreed by your unfailing word that they who are not born of the water and of the Spirit shall not enter into the kingdom of God. So this your servant, standing in awe of your word and desiring everlasting life, has willingly come for the baptism of this spiritual water. We now therefore pray, O Lord, send your Holy Spirit into this water and sanctify the same as you did sanctify the river Jordan by descending there into and prefiguring thereby this font of baptism for the regeneration of all people, O you who are our Lord Jesus Christ and are all-holy and sinless. And grant that this water in which this your servant is

about to be baptized, be for the remission of his/her sins and for the reception of the Holy Spirit, for the adoption as a child of the heavenly Father and for the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. So that being cleansed of sins he/she may live in this world to the satisfaction of your will and may receive in the world to come the inexhaustible bounties together with all your saints, and may thank you joyfully and glorify you always with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

The Prayer of Baptism (from *The Order of Baptism*)

You who have called this your servant, O Lord, to the holiness and the enlightenment of baptism, we pray you, make him/her worthy of your most precious grace. Put off him/her the old garment of sins and renew him/her to a new life. Fill him/her with the power of the Holy Spirit that he/she may have the renewal of the glory of your Christ. And to you, the Mighty One and to your only-begotten Son and to the liberating Holy Spirit is fitting dominion and honor, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.



The Baptism of Jesus: You are There!

Read the story of the baptism of Jesus Christ in *Matthew 3:1-17*. Now, imagine that you are one of the crowd of people who have gone into the wilderness to hear the preaching of John the Baptist and be baptized by him.

What kind of day is it? What do the wilderness and the bank of the Jordan look like? What sounds do you hear around you from the river, the trees, the birds, the breeze?

The people around you have come from all kinds of places—some are city folk from Jerusalem, others from the various parts of Judea. What do their voices sound like? What are they talking about? Are they praying quietly, waiting to hear the words of John the Baptist? Are they still, or are they moving around and jostling each other?



What about John himself? What does he look like? How does his voice sound? How do you feel as you hear him tell the proud priests (the Sadducees) that they must “bear fruit worthy of repentance?” How does the crowd react to his words? How do the Sadducees react?

What is the scene like as John baptizes people in the Jordan River? What do the newly-baptized people do or say as they come out of the water? What does the rest of the crowd do and say?

You hear John speak about a much greater one who is coming. John says, "I am not even worthy to carry his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." What do you feel and think about when you hear these words? What are the people around you saying?

Now Jesus comes to the Jordan, and asks John to baptize him. What happens when Jesus comes? How does Jesus look? What do people do and say when Jesus makes his startling request of John? What does John do?



Now Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. As he is coming up from the water, the heavens open. The Spirit of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. Everyone in the crowd hears the voice of God the Father saying that Jesus is his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased.

How do you feel as you hear the Father's voice? You are in the presence of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What do you do? What are the people around you doing? What is John doing?

What can you do today, in this present moment, to use the gift of the Holy Spirit that you received at baptism for the glory of God?

Quiz: What Gifts Has the Spirit Given You?

1 Corinthians 12:7-12 talks about the gifts of the Spirit. Read about them, and then take this quiz to see what gifts the Spirit may have given you. Put an X by each statement that is true about you, and then total up the number of X's for each letter.

- _____ a. My friends come to me for advice and help.
- _____ b. I like to learn new things.
- _____ c. I believe that God hears my prayers.
- _____ d. I hate to see people or animals in pain.
- _____ e. If something needs to be done, I'm the one who does it.
- _____ f. I speak out if I see someone being mistreated, even if it causes trouble.
- _____ g. When I watch commercials, I try to figure out what they are really saying.

- _____ a. I listen very carefully before I speak.
 - _____ b. I like to help others with their homework.
 - _____ c. I don't know everything about God, and that's OK.
 - _____ d. I want to be a doctor, nurse, physical therapist, or other medical professional.
 - _____ e. I have a lot of things going on at once.
 - _____ f. I like to help those who are poor.
 - _____ g. When I read or watch TV shows, I think about the message I'm getting.
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- _____ a. I like to show my thoughts and feelings in poetry, painting, or some other art.
 - _____ b. I want to be a teacher or a scientist.
 - _____ c. Even when things go badly, I can see God working in my life.
 - _____ d. I like visiting or sending cards to people who are sick.
 - _____ e. I think nothing is impossible.
 - _____ f. I reach out to those whom other people make fun of.
 - _____ g. I know that true friends don't try to get you to do wrong things, and none of my friends would do that.

So, which letter had the highest total?

- If it was a, you might have the gift of expression of wisdom.
- If it was b, you might have the gift of expression of knowledge.
- If it was c, you might have the gift of faith.
- If it was d, you might have the gift of healing.
- If it was e, you might have the gift of mighty deeds.
- If it was f, you might have the gift of prophecy (which does not mean predicting the future, but speaking out about God).
- If it was g, you might have the gift of discernment of spirits.



The Prayer of the Cross (from *The Order of Baptism*)



Guard us, O Christ our God, under the shadow of your holy and precious cross in peace. Deliver us from the enemy visible and invisible. Make us worthy to give thanks to you and to glorify you with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Session Four

The Trinity

1. God is one in three distinct but perfectly united persons—the Trinity.
2. Because God has shown himself to us as Trinity, it is essential to our faith that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. The Trinity is our example of perfect unity and mutual love.

Students will:

1. Identify some of the Biblical references to the Trinity.
2. Name some characteristics of each person of the Trinity.
3. Explore their own gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Key Concepts

Objectives

Background for Teacher

When we consider the Christian teaching that God is one in three persons, we are looking at something quite beyond our human power to explain or fully comprehend. But the deepest experience of those who have really come to know God is that he is Trinity. This is how he has made himself known to those who love him enough to spend much time in earnest prayer and contemplation.

This session will suggest some ways to talk about (we dare not say "explain") the Trinity with your students. We want them to understand that the three persons of the Trinity are always working for us and with us. We also want them to see the love personified in the Trinity—a love that is perfect and free of all blemish. This is the love that surrounds us as believers, and the love which we strive, as Christians, to offer to others.

Materials Needed

Divine Liturgy pew books.

Procedure

1. Open with a prayer that takes some of its words from the Divine Liturgy: "We are glad to be together to learn today. We are grateful for the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with whom to you, O Father, and to the Holy Spirit, is fitting glory, dominion, and honor, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

Point out that this prayer from the Divine Liturgy is addressed to the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as most prayers in the Armenian Church and her sister Orthodox churches are. Have students discuss their ideas of what it means that God is Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Students may express some confusion about how God's "threeness" and "oneness" can exist at the same time. They may express some mistaken ideas, such as the belief that we have three gods, or—on the other hand—that the Trinity is just three "faces" of the same person. Keep track of their ideas (jot a few notes or main words) so that you can talk about them later in the session, and tell students that you will be talking about these ideas again.

Procedure

For now, ask students a question: Where in the Bible is the first place that God refers to himself in the plural, or where we get the idea of God as Trinity? Let them offer answers, then read *Genesis 1:26* together. Here, at the very beginning of the Scriptures, God refers to himself this way.

Now read together the *Gospel of John 1:1-13*. This passage describes Christ, the "Word" of God, and tells us that he has always existed with his Father. He created the universe along with the Father. (Help the class see how this passage relates to the *Genesis* passage, both describing the persons of the Trinity creating, working, operating in perfect unity.)

For a specific reference to the Holy Spirit, read *Genesis 1:1-2*. (The word here is sometimes translated as "spirit" and sometimes as "wind," which is one of the ways the Holy Spirit comes to us, as on the Feast of Pentecost.) But the passage clearly shows the work of the Holy Spirit in creation, along with the Father and the Son. (10 mins)

2. Have the class read **Trinity: What It Is...What It Isn't** in the student text and then complete the exercise **What God Is Not**. Go over their answers with them, referring back to your notes on the ideas they expressed about the Trinity earlier, so that you can underscore or correct what they said.

You may find that students consider this "thinking" exercise hard going. Help them through it while they are doing it, and offer these answers to the questions posed to them in the exercise:

(1) The words in the Nicene Creed that show us that Jesus Christ is not a created being are "begotten and not made." The word that shows us the Holy Spirit is not created is its opposite, "uncreate," which is an older form of the word "uncreated."

(2) The creed emphasizes that Jesus Christ came to us as a real person by saying "he took body, soul, and mind and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance" (the phrase "in semblance" means "seeming to").

(3) The words that tell us that some people believed that the Son and the Holy Spirit were created beings are these: "As for those who say that there was a time when the Son was not, or there was a time

Key Concepts

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Procedure

say that there was a time when the Son was not, or there was a time when the Holy Spirit was not" (in other words, that there was a time before they were created when they did not exist). The church says that the Son and the Holy Spirit, in perfect unity with the Father, always existed and were not created by anyone or anything.

Note: To anathematize those who refuse to give up these wrong beliefs means to put them outside the body of believers, because by holding on to their own beliefs they show that they do not wish to be part of that body. (15 mins)

3. Have the class do the exercise **Meeting the Holy Spirit** in the student text. Go over the answers with them as follows: 1-d, 2-f, 3-g, 4-i, 5-h, 6-k, 7-a, 8-m, 9-c, 10-l, 11-e, 12-b, 13-j. (Note: the one passage that may need explanation is #10. To sin against the Holy Spirit here means to attribute Christ's power to the demons rather than to the Holy Spirit of God. This is to deny the work and power of the Holy Spirit, and thus to deny God's promise, in both the Old and New Testaments, that he would put his Spirit into his people. Such a denial of God will not be forgiven.) (10 mins)

4. Say to the class, "That last exercise was about meeting the Holy Spirit. But we have actually met the Holy Spirit already. When did it happen?" (Students may come up with the answer—it happened at our baptism—or you may provide the answer.)

Read together the story of Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus in *John 3:1-8*. Ask the class, "What is the new birth that Jesus refers to here?" (baptism) Point out to the students that Jesus does not explain the mystery of baptism in *verse 8*; he lets the mystery be a mystery! If the Son of God does not explain everything, we can have faith that not everything needs to be explained.

Read together the **Prayer Over the Water** from the baptism service in the student text. Notice that the encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus is referred to in the prayer. Also, notice that the prayer says that Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River "prefigured" ours in the font—in other words, he gave us the example of baptism.

Read also the **Prayer of Baptism** recited by the priest (in stu-

dent text). Notice that we ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

(5 mins)

Procedure

5. Have the class do the exercise **The Baptism of Jesus: You are There!** in the student text. Give them as much time as they need to do this, and let them talk over the experience after they finish, to compare impressions and thoughts. (10 mins)

6. Read together *1 Corinthians 12:7-12*, which talks about the various gifts of the Spirit. Let class members take the quiz **What Gifts Has the Spirit Given You?** and spend some quiet time meditating on how they can nurture and use the gifts of the Spirit in their lives. Use the Prayer of the Cross from the baptism service as a closing prayer (see student text). (10 mins)