

“Foundations: God”  
 Luke 3:21-22; Matthew 28:19

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Scripture: Luke 3:21-22; Matthew 28:19

Sermon:

***Introduction***

Have any of you ever heard something to the effect of “All religions lead to God”? Or “All religions are the same”? Or, perhaps, “Christians and Muslims should get along. We’re praying to the same God, after all!”? If you’ve ever taken a comparative religions course, chances are the basic assumption behind the course was that all religions are fundamentally the same with only superficial differences. Certainly that is the assumption in most of the media I’ve come across. [pic] They assume all religions are fundamentally the same and then have to scramble to explain why Islam has political components that can be pursued by military means. They’re shocked by the violence inherent in Islam and try to chalk it up to a radical “fringe.”

Many non-Christians today are extremely invested in this idea that all religions are fundamentally the same and that the differences are superficial at best. Why is that? Because if you can paint all religions with the same brush, then you can ignore them all equally, or at least ignore the radical call Jesus places on us. **If all religions are the same, then you can safely ignore Jesus.**

Our culture is increasingly secular or non-religious. It is also increasingly diverse. More and more other religions are increasing in representation in Canada as our cultural diversity grows. As a result, we are confronted with more and more questions about Christianity, what we believe and whether or not Christianity has anything special to offer.

If we are to successfully engage our culture, as Jesus calls us to do, or if we are even to survive in our own walk of faith, we need to regularly discuss the foundational beliefs of Christianity. Now, however, it is not only valuable to talk about our beliefs, but also to contrast them with the beliefs of other religions. One result of the religious diversity in Ontario is that many people, when faced with so many options, throw up their hands and choose nothing. **We need to be able to communicate the special nature of Christianity to people of other faiths as well as articulate the uniqueness of Christ to a secular culture as well.**

That is what this series is going to be about. We are going to talk about some of the foundational beliefs of Christianity, explore what the classical statements of Christianity mean, and then contrast those beliefs with other religions in order to highlight the uniqueness of Christ.

Today we are going to begin this series by tackling the Christian understanding of God. I’m going to preach one sermon on God and cover everything. Wait! I can’t do that. That’s not possible! So instead, I’ll just preach on the Trinity and cover all of that in 1 sermon. Wait! Can’t do that either! So what we are going to do is talk about where the idea of the Trinity comes from and some of the significant consequences of the Trinitarian nature of God. Then we will contrast the Christian understanding of God with some other religions in order to better appreciate the Christian view.

I’m not going to try to fully explain the Trinity. I can’t do that because I don’t fully grasp it myself. I’m not going to go through all the passages that talk about the Trinity. I’m taking for granted the characteristics of God as classically described, not trying to show you where they come from or all their nuances.

What is the Trinity? That’s not a word we use elsewhere, so what does it mean? The word Trinity does not appear in the Bible. It is not Biblical word. It is a word developed to try to describe or encapsulate something we find in the New Testament. **The word Trinity is not a Biblical term, but it is a Biblical concept.** It describes something we see of God in the NT.

Specifically, **the word “Trinity” describes the simultaneous unity of God and diversity of three persons found in God.** The three persons of God are Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in that order. So if we talk about the third member or third person of the Trinity we mean the Spirit. If we talk about the second member, we mean the Son. The Son, the second person of the Trinity, came to earth as a baby named Jesus, grew into adulthood, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day, the Spirit raised him from the dead. Over the past two years we have done extensive series on both Jesus and the Spirit, so if you want to know more about

them, please check our church website for those sermons in either text form or streaming audio.

### **Context**

Remember, the Bible doesn't come out and define the Trinity. Nor does it explain it. Rather, the concept of the Trinity is an attempt to describe or understand what we read in the NT- that Jesus is God, yet he speaks of the Father both as God and yet distinct from Jesus, and the Spirit is God, but distinct from both Jesus and the Father.

Today we are going to look at two of many texts in the NT that describe each of Jesus, the Father and the Spirit in terms of all being God. Yet most of these texts also assume that God is a unity; that there is just one God. Christians are mono-theists. They believe in 1 God and 1 God only. The Trinity is an attempt to hold in tension both the unity of God and the three-fold diversity of Father, Son and Spirit.

Our first text, taken from Luke, is Luke's description of Jesus' baptism. These events took place just before Jesus began his public ministry. Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist is one of just a few events described in all four Gospels. And in all four Gospel accounts, all three members of the Trinity are named.

The second text is taken from the end of Matthew's Gospel. These events took place at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, just before Jesus returned to the Father, sending the Spirit to carry on his work on earth. These words are part of the famous "Great Commission." Let's read these together.

### **Text**

\*\*\* Read Luke 3:21-22; Matthew 28:19

### **Observations**

Since we are zeroing in on the Trinity today, our observations from these passages are going to be very narrow. We're not setting out to understand these passages in their entirety. Rather, we are using them as two case studies of the NT's description of God with respect to the Trinity. We are looking at them as examples to help us understand why the doctrine of the Trinity had to be developed and to see some of the vital elements of that doctrine.

First, in Luke, notice that Jesus is the centre of the action. As he comes up out of the water, there is a tear in the veil between heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit descends onto Jesus in the form of a dove. So we see the third person of the Trinity as distinct from Jesus. A voice from Heaven, God's voice, not a voice from the dove, so distinct from the Spirit, says, "This is my Son." So Jesus is identified as the Son, distinct from the Spirit and distinct from the voice. Because of the reciprocal relationship between fathers and sons, we can then identify the voice as belonging to the Father.

**Jesus is identified as the Son of God. The Spirit is called "Holy" which identifies the Spirit as divine. The voice is God the Father's voice.** So we see all three members of the Trinity present at Jesus' baptism. They are all God, yet they are distinct. Notice, too, the relationship between the Father and Son. God says, "This is my Son whom I love." Here we see the loving relationship between the first two members of the Trinity. Take my word for it, there is love between all three members of the Trinity! And, of course, this word for love is agape, the divine, self-giving love primarily concerned with the well-being of others.

That the Father loves the Son is more than just a nice sentiment. Love requires relationship, which requires distinction. Love, properly understood, requires two or more individuals. You cannot love yourself with agape love in the truest sense of love. **There must be another in order to love.** This is easily missed in this passage, but it turns out to be a very important characteristic of God and is related to the Trinity.

So what we see in this passage is the diversity or distinction between the three members of the Trinity and the loving relationship that exists between them, further emphasising their distinction.

Now consider the passage in Matthew. Bypassing all of the amazing significance of Jesus' final command to his followers, zoom in on what he says about baptism. He commands us to "baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Notice he says, "the name" (singular) not "the names" (plural). There is one name for the Father, Son and Spirit.

What does it mean to baptize in their name? As you may recall, names in the ancient world reflected a person's character or nature. They were not just labels parents attached to their children. So Jesus is saying that we are to baptize in the character or nature of the Father, Son and Spirit. And that character is one. So what can we take from this passage? **We see the distinction between the Father, Son and Spirit in that they are all named. We see the unity in the Father, Son and Spirit in that their character, nature or name is all one.**

For Jesus to list the Son and the Spirit along with the Father in the baptism formula means he is counting all three as being equal. If the Son and Spirit were somehow less than God, or were not God, then to name them all together as having the same “name” to be baptised in would be heresy! So clearly all three are equal in nature, all three are equal in character. They are all God. **The members of the Trinity are distinguished numerically as persons, but are indistinguishable and inseparable in essence, substance or being.** [Millar Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 362]

These are just two of many passages in the NT that describe this interrelation between the Father, Son and Spirit. Some of the passages are explicit, some are more subtle. I’ve listed a number of them on your outline for you to look at on your own. I encourage you to take the time to look up those passages, read them and ask yourself, “Where do I see the members of the Trinity in these verses?” It is a helpful in Bible reading.

So, having observed two places that describe some of the characteristics of God’s Trinitarian nature, let’s draw some conclusions and talk about how to interpret not just these passages, but the Trinity as a whole.

### ***Interpretation***

The first lesson we must take from these passages is that **Jesus was not just a great man**. The NT actually names him God! He, himself, identifies himself as God. A great man who was merely a great man would not identify himself as God. To call yourself God means you are either a) crazy (our mental health facilities have many people who think they’re God), b) a pathological liar and manipulator straight from the pit of Hell, or c) actually God. Jesus does not leave us the option of saying he is merely a great teacher or a great man or a great moral guide. If you would like a more in depth treatment of this, you can read one of my sermons on Jesus from a year ago, or, even better, read C S Lewis’ book *Mere Christianity*.

The second lesson we can take from the Trinity is that **God is both close and beyond**. The fancy way saying this is that God is both immanent and transcendent. That means he is both close to us and beyond us. We see the nearness in Jesus and the incarnation. God became one of us! He walked the earth, touched people, spoke with them, ate with them. He got tired and thirsty. He came in order to relate to us as a person to people. **God is relational.** [incl pic]

Yet, God is still way beyond us. He is far above our comprehension. The fact that the Trinity is so hard to grasp as a concept is one example of this. When Jesus taught his followers how to pray, how did he begin the prayer? Our Father, in Heaven. Father- close. In Heaven- beyond.

Another important characteristic of God that is seen in the Trinity is that God is love. But remember, love is a relational word. Before God created the universe, God was already love. God didn’t need to create the universe in order to have something to love. He chose to do so, but did not need to do so. **So if God was love before creation, whom was he loving? Love existed between the different members of the Trinity!** Even in one of our passages we see this. “This is my Son, whom I love!”

Many of us are very keen to think about God being love. We like to focus on this aspect of God. But did you realize that it was actually integral to the Trinity?!? We rarely ponder the Trinity. But God being love is intricately connected with God being a Trinity!

One slightly more obscure, but equally important aspect of God’s Trinitarian character that I want to highlight this morning is that **God is holy**. We frequently refer to the Spirit as the “Holy Spirit.” We must remember, though, that the characteristics of the members of the Trinity are shared characteristics. If the Spirit is holy, then so are the Son and the Father. That God is holy is another important, classical characteristic of God. But we see, here, that it is also intertwined with the Trinity. This will become important in our application time when we compare the God of Christianity with some other religions.

Lastly, I want to give one more way to think of the Trinity. In the opening of John’s Gospel, Jesus is called the Word. That passage is a very important one for establishing and understanding the divinity of Jesus, that his is, was and always will be God. But it doesn’t cover the Spirit, so it’s not Trinitarian. However, it does give us another way to think of the Trinity that can be very helpful. We’ve talked before about the fact that in both Hebrew and Greek the word “spirit” can also mean “wind” or “breath.” So here’s **another way to think of the Trinity: God, God’s Word and God’s Breath**. A god who cannot speak, has no word or is mute, is not much of a god. A god with no breath is dead! So a helpful way to think of the Trinity that emphasises the unity of God, is God, God’s Word and God’s Breath. We’re going to put that one in our back pocket to use later.

Ok, we've had a lot of heavy thinking so far! Phew! This is heavy sledding theologically. Anybody's brain feel full yet? I think it's time for us to see why this matters. Why is it significant that God is a Trinity? How does that make Christianity different? It's time to apply what we've learned!

### ***Now Apply It***

First, and maybe most importantly, the difficulty of understanding the Trinity should humble us. We need to remember that God is infinite and far beyond our comprehension. It is an act of grace on his part that he has revealed so much of himself to us in order for us to know him, love him and be with him. But the Trinity reminds us to **let God be God**.

What do I mean by that? I mean that God deserves our worship, obedience and praise as a being so far beyond our comprehension. We often fall into the trap of creating God in our own image, thinking of God as he would be if we were God. But we need to be reminded he is way beyond us. As a result, we need to stop demanding that his truth make sense to us all the time. We need to stop demanding that his actions be pleasing and pleasant to us. We need to stop being frustrated to bitter if his will conflicts with our freedom. We need to stop demanding that he not impose any duties or responsibilities on us. We have to stop demanding or expecting that he give us whatever we ask in prayer! [Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 282]

I know I struggle to let God be God. I want him to make sense all the time. I want him to answer my prayers the way I want them answered. I get frustrated at having duties and responsibilities to him. I get confused when his plan doesn't make sense to me. I get frustrated when his will contradicts mine. But I have to remember, he is God! It's not up to him to do things my way, it's up to me to do things his way! And, talking with many of you, I know it's common for us to struggle with these things. We don't always "get" God, his plans, his commands, his answers to prayer. But he is God! Maybe we shouldn't always "get" it. Maybe anybody who says they always do "get it" shouldn't be trusted.

We also need to study the Trinity to protect ourselves against false teaching. [**pic**] People often use the word "God" to mean things that are not the Christian God. I know I've heard Oprah Winfrey talk about God in ways that were clearly not Biblical! In today's multi-cultural, pluralistic culture, we must always be on guard not to assume that when somebody else is talking about "God" that they're talking about our God.

This is the mistake we make when we talk about Islam and Christianity following the same God. **Muslims do not believe in the Trinity**. Allah is not Trinitarian. In fact, one of Islam's greatest objections to Christianity is that they see the Trinity as a form of poly-theism. They think the Trinity means three gods, not one. However, if you ask most Muslims who they think the members of the Trinity are, they will say, "God the Father, the Virgin Mary, and the Baby Jesus." So they're so far wrong from the start it's easy to see why they object. This is one circumstance in which speaking of God as God, God's Word and God's Breath can be very helpful. For a Muslim, it would be reassuring to hear that description of the Trinity because it emphasises the unity of God. Christianity is mono-theistic.

Here's another application of the importance of the Trinity with respect to Islam. In Christianity, God is personable. God came to us to relate to us. Not only that, he became human and shared life on earth with us! That is something Allah would never do! In Islam, Allah is so transcendent, so "above" or "beyond" that the idea of him taking human form or coming to earth is unthinkable. **In Jesus we see that God is far more relational than Allah**.

Similarly, if we think of the purpose of the Incarnation, of the Second Person of the Trinity coming to earth as a man, we see another distinction between the God of Christianity and the God of Islam. In Islam, Allah will weigh each person's deeds on a scale. If the good outweighs the bad, they go to paradise. So in Islam, there is no way to know, before judgement, if you've been a good enough Muslim. You can't weigh your own good deeds and bad deeds. The only sure way to go to paradise in Islam is to be a martyr for Allah, which is why they are able to recruit so many young men to fight and even be suicide bombers for Allah!

In Christianity, however, God sent the Son in order to pay for our sins for us. God's whole plan was to open a way to forgive our sins, not just test their weight. **"In Islam, Allah asks you to send your son to die for him. In Christianity, God sent his Son to die for you!"** [Tony Costa, *Isis and the Cross Conference*, PPBC, Nov 22, 2014]

Similarly, in the Trinity we see a far more relational God than in Eastern pantheism. Pantheism means

everything is god. Pan means “all.” So our partners in Kenya, PACE, Pan Africa Christian Exchange, means a Christian exchange across all of Africa. Pan means all, so pantheism means all is god. The whole world, the entire universe, all of creation is actually god, it’s just that most of us don’t know it yet. Although there is huge variety in Hinduism, one consistent theme is pantheism. All of us are part of god. We are not gods (plural) but we are all one with the universe which is god. [James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, p. 144]

**So in pantheism, there is no relationship. God is all. There is no distinction with which to relate.** It’s like saying I’m relating to myself. That’s not really a relationship. Furthermore, without an “other” there can be no love. If we’re all god, then there’s nobody else to love. The distinctions we see as different people are all illusions. We are all one. There is no such thing as love because love requires one to give the love and another to receive the love.

The Christian God, then, as you can see, is very different than the gods of other religions. Even Allah is not loving. He is too holy to love creation. He is not relational.

Some people think of God as a benign “higher power” that started the universe going and has kept his hands off it ever since. The technical word for this is Deism. **Many scientists are forced to believe in a creator of some sort because of the results of Einstein’s theories of relativity.** Because the universe is clearly not infinite in size or age, there must have been a god of some kind who started it. However, many scientists and philosophers leave it at that, assuming that the god who created the universe no longer relates to the universe. Again, there is a strong contrast between this “divine watchmaker” and the God of Christianity. The “divine first cause” god is not relational, and certainly not loving. But in contrast, the God of Christianity is not only loving, but his very Trinitarian nature involves relationship and love!

Hopefully you’ve begun to see that Christianity is unique in its belief in the Trinity. Hopefully you’ve also begun to see that the Trinity is more than just an obscure theological concept, but that it tells us a lot about God’s relational nature. The Trinity is central to God being love! And this is very different than the ideas of God in other religions, even when we take such a cursory look at them.

At Priory we want to be a community in which people belong, grow and serve. So for the rest of this series, I am going to frame some of our application time in these terms. How does this affect how we belong at Priory? **Contrasting the Christian faith with other faiths gives us a greater sense of our identity as followers of Christ.** Our God is relational as well as holy. He is both close and beyond. He is love. That is different from the gods of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and New Age spirituality. When we use the word “Christian” it means “little Christs.” Who are we to be like? We are to be like Jesus, the second person of the Trinity! Something found in no other religion.

What does this mean for our growth? Understanding the Trinity requires that we grow in our knowledge and understanding. **It means we won’t be blown back and forth by every wind and wave of teaching.** When we hear somebody talking about “God” we will be better equipped to discern whether or not they are talking about the Christian God who is the Trinity. It helps us hold onto the deep truths of the faith. As our understanding of God grows, our love for him, our adoration of him and our obedience to him should deepen and mature.

Finally, how does this help us serve? If we are to teach one another, we need to learn it first. This allows us to help fellow Christians understand our God better. It also gives us **tools or language with which to share Christianity** with non-Christians in the hopes to draw them to Christ. Many Muslims are impressed that the Christian God is relational and actually cares about our daily lives and instructs us to pray for our personal needs!

It also gives us language and understanding with which to **warn fellow believers** who are being led astray, or contemplating marrying somebody who isn’t a Christian. If we can better articulate the important differences between Christianity and Islam, or Buddhism or Hinduism, we are better equipped to show somebody how their marriage might be affected by uniting with somebody whose core religious beliefs are so different than ours.

Finally, it helps us **know the God we are serving.** If we are called to serve out of our love for God, it is helpful to know that he is not just a distant, uninvolved observer, but actually a relational God interested in us knowing how much he loves us and returning that love to him! It’s like working for a boss you never see vs working for a boss who walks alongside you and encourages you all day.

So this week, as you watch the news, or listen to people talk, be on the lookout for talk of God, or religion. Ask yourself if their talk reflects a basic assumption that all religions are the same. If they speak of “God” try to

determine if the god they are speaking of is our God who is a Trinity, or some other god. Know the truth about God and you will love him more and not be as easily led astray from him. Amen.