



Trinity and Relationships

People say “You are what you eat”. The truth is: “you become like your god”. Who or what you worship will decide the kind of person you become. The Greek or Roman gods were selfish and unpredictable, and gave a person every right to be the same. So, if you worshiped Mars, the god of war, violence would seem normal and you would aspire to victory. Living peacefully with others would have been a failure.

Think about the god who lives in the imagination of many Australians. He is a lonely god: not needing anyone or anything, uninvolved with the world. People may talk about this god’s love, but they know (or suspect) that it is a general niceness with no heart or passion. He has arranged the world to suit himself and we have to put up with it — “life is like that”. This god is worshipped from a distance and his worship is undemanding, because he does not really care about it. He is respected and honoured, especially at significant life events, but he and you expect no more than that.

When god is like that, then we can happily focus on ourselves, and use the other people around us to suit ourselves. The key to life is independence. Love is politeness and sentimentality, not passionate commitment.

But that is not the God Christians worship: the true God, the maker and redeemer who reveals Himself through scripture by what He does and says. He is the triune God, the one God who is Father, Son and Spirit. He is trinity in unity, three persons who are eternally one in loving intimacy. The “Trinity” is not a confusing theological idea, nor esoteric mysticism, rather it is the classic Christian summary of who God is. Since we become like our God, how will this affect our lives? I want to help you see that worshipping the Trinitarian God has huge implications for the way you live.

What God is like: The best place to start this journey of understanding is with the fact that God is love (1 John 4:8). That does not simply mean that God is loving, or that he has made love. It means that from eternity God has been three persons bound together in intimacy — loving and being loved. When you get to the heart of the universe you don’t find a lonely God, but One who has always loved and known love. Because God is involved in personal relationships, we aren’t surprised that that’s also how he treats us. His love for us is passionate and committed and he knows us and intends that we will know him (1 Cor 13:12).

Because God is triune, relationships are the real stuff of life. In fact they are the only ultimate thing. We are like God and are made to relate to him, so we are made for relationships. After being friends with God, knowing and loving people is the big thing in life. Life is not mainly about contentment or success or power or money. Funnily enough, it is other people who give us most of our satisfaction. I guess that’s why a friend of mine says that playing golf alone and a hitting a hole in one, would be worse than not hitting one! We want other people to share our excitement.

As we look more closely at God’s relationships within himself, we can see what our relationships are meant to be. I want to look at three important aspects of God’s triune nature, and see the relevance they have for us.

Intimacy: The Father, Son and Spirit have a unity that is based on intimacy. They share all that they have with each other. Jesus speaks of being “in the Father” and the Father being in him (John 17:21). He knows the Father and the Father’s words and deeds (John 5:19, 7:16, 8:28, 14:24). The Spirit takes what is the Son’s and shares it with us (John 16:14). God (the Father) knows the

Spirit's mind, and the Spirit knows his will (Rom 8:27). This intimacy is such that seeing the Son means seeing the Father (John 14:9) and having the Spirit means having Christ (John 14:18, Romans 8:9-11). The persons of the Trinity are inter-dependent.

What is true for God is true for us. We are made for close personal relationships. In a real relationship you know someone at more than a superficial level, you listen to them and speak, you see what they do, how they react and you share yourself with them. A mature person is not an independent loner, but has friends to trust and share with.

Selflessness: God is not a selfish God. The persons of the Trinity do not seek their own glory at the expense of the others. The Son does not seek his own glory, but his Father's (8:50, 54). When the Son is glorified, it is by glorifying the Father (John 14:13, 17:4-5). As you read about Jesus in the gospels, you see the Son rejoicing to obey his Father. In the same way when the Son is exalted, so is the Father. The Spirit seeks the glory of the Father and Son and in them he is glorified. There is no hint of jealousy, competitiveness or selfishness.

When you are genuine in a relationship, you also focus on the other person and not on yourself. Relationships are not a way to meet your own needs and assert yourself but a way to serve other people (which has the surprising result of meeting your needs!). A great person is not a master but a servant (Mk 10:42-45). This is very different from the women's magazines which look at relationships and tell you "how to get out when he is dragging you down". It is a world away from looking after "the most important person — you".

Equal but ordered: The Father, Son and Spirit are equal in every way. The famous Athanasian creed confesses that the Godhead of the Father, Son and Spirit *"is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal"*. As sinners we naturally want hierarchies and power arrangements to set up relationships. Either we seek out dominance, or we like being controlled. However, God is not like that.

It may come as a surprise to us that the Son obeys the Father, or that the Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son. We assume that anyone who obeys, or is sent must be less than the person who has authority over him or sends him. We need to remember that in God's triune relationships there is an order, but it is not a matter of inequality, nor of greater significance or power.

This means that being equal to others, and having a close personal relationship with them, does not mean that we must relate to each other exactly in the same way. The times I submit to others does not rob me of significance, and the authority I have in some settings does not make me greater.

Being a real person: What does worshipping the Triune God show us about being real people? God's nature gives us insight into what really matters in life — caring, personal relationships.

As an age we are obsessed with fulfilling ourselves. The gospel of the Triune God shows us the empty spaces that will be filled when we have a loving relationship with God through Christ in the Spirit, and when we let that relationship change the way we relate to each other. Self-assertion is not the path, nor is lonely meditation a way of getting in touch with yourself. The real you will only be found in the setting of relationships.

When we see this we will start to be ready, even eager, to serve people. We will want to listen to them and know them, and to speak honestly about ourselves. It won't mean that everyone knows all our darkest secrets, but we will want open relationships, and will not selfishly shut ourselves off from other people.

Let's think about how we will act in some specific relationships and activities.

- **Evangelism:** The gospel is all about relationships. Jesus talks about "life": *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). He says life is knowing God through his Son (John 17:3). We need to show people that the offer of the gospel is not merely a "ticket to

heaven” or a good insurance policy, but an entry into the family life of God; being the brother and sisters of the Son (Rom 8:29).

Our methods of evangelism must reflect this, they must involve relationships. The men who stand in the streets of my town and shout the gospel, but never engage in conversation, are missing this. We should not be surprised that the most effective outreach happens within families and friendships. We need to get to know people, as we help them get to know God. This doesn't mean that you can never talk about Jesus to the lady you meet on the bus. But even then, you will want to hear and understand her.

- **Church:** Jesus' vision for his people is unity, being bound to one another as the Father and Son are (John 17:20-23). Our unity will come from a relationship with God, founded in the truth of the gospel and discovered by genuine faith. Our relationships will be intimate and loving. We are not like the crowd in a shopping centre, a random collection of whoever happens to be in the same building. We need to know each other and care for each other.

The local church and the wider fellowship of God's people do not reflect God when our focus is on legal power and procedures. The church is not meant to be a hierarchical organisation where all should know their place and stay where they should. As ordered and organised Presbyterians, we must remember that our rules and structures are meant to serve and support relationships, not stifle and destroy them. We are bound to each other personally in Christ, before having organisational links. It is this underlying unity which we must strive to maintain.

God has appointed people to exercise authority in various ways in the church. They will still have relationships with people and will use their authority to serve others. The fact that you have some authority in the church does not mean that you're more significant than others; if you feel as if you are “at the bottom of the pile”, you are still equally important. That is the implication of the Trinity. The theory of Presbyterian church government is that we are overseen by those we have relationships with, and that there are no lesser or greater Christians. Sadly, our practice does not always match our theory!

Within churches there will be differences in style, in preferences, in culture and in convictions. It is sometimes tempting to feel that we need uniformity to have unity. However God's tri-unity shows us that full unity does not demand bland uniformity. Within real relationships, we can know unity; even when we disagree on something.

- **Family:** Most of us have our most significant human relationships within our families. Tragically, some of us will have had a family which has been degrading and abusive. We may feel robbed that we have not had a loving family. The gospel offers us a better and more real family — through our adoption by God. In God's family you will discover everything a human family has, and far more (Mark 10:29ff). Good families reflect something of God's loving nature, and Christians can build families on the basis of the family life of God.

As we live in our families, we need to remember that they are all about relationships. A family is not mainly an economic unit, or an efficient organisation, or the group of people to make you happy. Families are meant to be the people we know intimately and are committed to serving. Parents and children who are too busy to connect with each other, and who expect the family to bend to their every whim, are not reflecting God's character. Family life requires trust, listening and speaking to one another; it is lived with mutual give and take, not rigid demands.

Parents have authority over their children (Ephesians 6:1), husbands are called to serve their wives through leadership (Ephesians 6:22-24). This authority does not mean that they are more important in the family, and it is not to be used to make themselves comfortable. God the Father uses his authority to glorify the Son. He loves the Son and rejoices in him. That is the model for human parents. Jesus' loving self-sacrifice is how husbands are to love their wives (Ephesians 6:25-33).

- **Sex:** Our society has a perverted and distorted view of sex. Sexual intercourse is meant to be an experience of great intimacy in a relationship where husband and wife are committed to each other in love. Pornography, one-night stands, brief flings, and the search for the perfect sexual experience rip sexual expression out of its proper setting and make it impersonal, self-centered and dissatisfying. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that a relationship of exclusive commitment must first be present. Only then can sexual intimacy deepen and enrich it.
- **Society:** Do we live in an economy or a society? Our governments increasingly assume that economic relationships are the only ones that matter, and that success is measured by the bottom line. This meant that the Federal Government would not apologise to the Aboriginal people for several generations of genocide and dispossessing their land because it might cost the rest of Australia too much money.

This “economic rationalism” is individualistic and selfish; it focuses only on what is best for most individuals. But people are always bound up in a web of relationships, and to treat them as isolated individuals makes them less than human. As Christians we have to think about society as a whole, and about knowing and serving each other, not just making money. Our thinking about society must question many of the assumptions of our political leaders, regardless of which party they represent.

In the Nicene creed we confess the God we worship:

*“We believe in one God the Father...
We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ
the only Son of God eternally begotten from the Father...
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son
who with the Holy Spirit is worshipped and glorified...”*

To worship this God is to know that there is passionate, personal and committed love at the heart of the universe. In His very essence, as Father, Son and Spirit, we discover that the ultimate reality is personal relationships. To worship this God, to know and love Him, to enter into His life, is to become committed to knowing and loving others. This is what it means to be real. After all, who you worship will decide who you become.

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