

# OpenTheo

## #121 Making sense of The Trinity

June 9, 2022



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Ahead of Trinity Sunday, Tom answers questions about the Trinity: How do I explain the Trinity without accidental heresy? is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? Can you explain Jesus' prayer for intimacy with the Father and the Spirit in John 17?

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## Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast Welcome back. This is Justin Brieley and the show where I get to sit down with one of the world's leading theologians, Tom Wright, to ask your questions. Brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NTWright.

Online. The show comes to you from Premier Unbelievable. You can find lots more of our resources and shows at our website, [premierunbelievable.com](https://premierunbelievable.com). It's linked with the info in today's show.

Today, ahead of Trinity Sunday in the Church calendar, Tom answers questions about the Trinity. How do I explain the Trinity without falling into accidental heresy? Is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? Can you explain how Jesus prays for intimacy with the Father and Spirit in John 17? Perhaps you joined us for the unbelievable conference back in May. Well, we'd love you to be part of our upcoming online webinars in June and July.

We've got some exciting guests joining me at these free events, including a big conversation event on the 12th of July with Michaela Peterson, daughter of the famed psychologist Jordan Peterson, along with YouTuber John McCray. They'll be asking, "Is

Gen Z ready to believe in God again? It should be a really great conversation." And you can book in to be part of it at [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live). Without further ado, let's hear what you want to ask Tom about the Trinity. Well, on today's show, we're going to be looking at your questions around a specific area of doctrine.

The Trinity, Scott in Washington, D.C., has questions. There's a question about the hierarchy, whether there is a hierarchy in the Trinity. And Beck in Georgia, U.S., wants to know about Jesus praying for his followers to receive the same intimacy as he had.

So I'm sure these will test us, Tom, as Scott puts it, not detour into any heresies along the way. Let's hear Scott's question, first of all, who says, "I'd like to be able to describe the Godhead to believing and unbelieving friends alike in the most concise and easy to understand language without accidentally detouring into heresy. Do you have any suggestions on how to talk about or describe the Trinity, especially how there is certainly a three-ness yet still a oneness? And I know you're not fond of giving short answers to complex questions, but I'd appreciate any insight you have." Okay, that's Scott's question.

Where would you begin, Tom? I would begin with Jesus because the question about God is always turned around the other way in the New Testament. Somebody asked me the other day, it was one of these surveys that people send out from time to time. "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and if so, why, and when did you come to this belief?" etc.

And I replied, "The question is the wrong way round. It's not, do we know who God is and then is Jesus his Son? It's we are to look at Jesus and then ask, is the God who made the world really the Father of Jesus? God is the great unknown as it were. Jesus is the one who is revealed to us.

So when Jesus is asked in John 14, show us the Father, and that'll be enough for us. He says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." That is an extraordinary claim, but it's what Jesus also says in say Matthew 11, that no one knows the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. So the Christian claim is not that we can kind of map God and that we can look down from a great height and see, "I guess, that's what God looks like." Fine, okay, and that's all comprehensible.

It isn't in that sense comprehensible. Rather, God is embracing us and asking us to know and love him, and the way he does that is by showing us Jesus and then saying, "Now understand who I am in relation to this human being who is the very embodiment of the one God of Israel." So in a sense, this knocks all our questions to and fro and makes us reshape them, but it's why in John 1, we have this evocation of Genesis and Exodus. In the beginning was the Word.

All things were made through him, and the Word became flesh and tabernacled in our

midst. The one through whom the worlds were made came to be one of us, came to live with us, like the glory of God dwelling in the temple, in the tabernacle, in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem. And in John 1, we find John, like Paul in Colossians 1, drawing on Jewish ideas that were out there before the time of Jesus, Jewish ideas about how the one God relates to the world.

And many wise Jews were aware for a long time, partly because it's there in the Psalms and in Proverbs and so on, were aware that if the one God who made the world is nevertheless active within the world, we need to say some rather initially confusing things about God being greater than and other than the world, and nevertheless God being active within it. One of the ways they do that is to talk about God's wisdom, that God by wisdom made the world, but now wisdom orders the world. And if you want to be a genuine God-reflecting human, you need wisdom.

You need God to come and dwell in his wisdom with you. But then it's the same picture, as we find in 1 Kings 8 when Solomon says, "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built, nevertheless when we pray towards this house, then hear from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear forgive." There is always this sense of the same God who is utterly other than the world and has made the world and is sovereign over it, nevertheless in grace and love coming to dwell within, to animate, to enliven the world, to rescue his people, and ultimately to remake his world in the way that he always ultimately intended. And so this kind of story about a God who is other than and yet present within the world was going on in various ways in the Jewish world and always with that sense of this great God, nevertheless condescending to dwell with people and to love them and to be present in their troubles, and particularly in the great book of Isaiah, in all their affliction he was afflicted and in his presence he loved and carried them and so on.

So then when the early Christians find that Jesus seems to be embodying and bodying forth the presence of God in their midst, they have these Jewish ways of thinking about God ready to hand. And one of the most dramatic moments in the New Testament is when Paul, talking about how Christians are monotheists and not pagan-style polytheists, quotes the Jewish prayer the Shema, here, Israel the Lord, our God the Lord is one, and he does so in order to have God meaning God the Father and Lord meaning Jesus the Messiah. And we look and we say this is a monotheistic prayer, this is all about the one loving Creator God and yet we see this one God as Father and as Jesus as Lord.

And as Paul says later in the same letter, that by the way is 1 Corinthians 8, 6, but in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul wanting to say that the church is one family, a single being, he nevertheless says there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit, varieties of ministry but the same Lord, varieties of operation but it's the same God who works all of them together. At the very moment when he's saying it's all the same he says it in those three different ways. Now you can no doubt produce pretty pictures of formulae and St. Patrick

with his shamrock and so on three and one but for me it's going back into that Jewish way of thinking which is the best way in and it's a way of thinking which says this isn't a theory for you to look at in a scientific way from a distance, it's a life, the life of the people of God, the praying life of the people of God, where in the power of the Spirit we are drawn into the people of God who know the Father through the Son.

I'm not sure we can do it any better than that, there are no down ways of newancing it this way and that but that's how the New Testament basically presents it. Yes and I suppose once again we have to just accept that we're in a position where we can't give necessarily an easy illustration, the shamrock or the water taking three forms and everything else. There may be a place for those in some types of discussion but I mean one thing that strikes me just in what you said even there Tom is were the early Christians ever accused of being essentially polytheistic because they had this belief that Jesus was one with the Father and so on? There was a lot of confusion certainly and there were some particularly in the second century in onwards who some Jewish people who said that this basically was adding another God to the pantheon and isn't that the sort of thing that pagans would do but it was never quite that easy, the accusation wasn't formulated really in that way and it's fascinating that though we find in the first century a lot of questions coming from the Jewish side to the early Christians, many of whom of course are themselves Jews, most of whom are originally Jews, this isn't something which comes up particularly you don't find Paul in his letters saying so how can some of you say that Jesus isn't the Son of God because thus and so and of course one thing which I haven't mentioned is the language of sonship which is messianic language in Psalm 2 God says to the king you are my son this day of I begotten you but then in 2 Samuel 7 one of the great passages which the New Testament refers to David wants to build a house for God to live in and God says I'm going to build you a house because I will give you a family, I will raise up your seed after you, I will be his father, he will be my son and he will build the temple and so it's almost kaleidoscopic we get this idea of the temple where God is going to live but also the person in whom God is going to be present and the New Testament richly draws on that as a way of saying again he is the image of the invisible God Colossians 1 it's when we look at Jesus we see who God is and it's that seeing and recognition which is more important than any theory that we can stitch together around the outside.

I suspect we may have to have a similar approach to the next question on the Trinity that there's no name attached to this one but this listener asks is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? It seems in some passages as if God is over Jesus in Hebrews 5 verses 7 to 10 Jesus learned obedience sounds almost like a slave and master in Hebrews 12 verses 1 to 3 Jesus is sitting at God's right hander God appears to be on the throne in Jesus second in command in Matthew 24 verse 36 it says only the Father knows the day and time and so on. So there are those examples and then elsewhere Stephen sees Christ standing at the right hand of God in Acts 7 whereas Hebrews 12 verse 1 to 3 says Jesus

sat down at the right hand of the throne of God is there a significance and difference so this is just a general question given that there are different images used about the relationship of Jesus to the Father specifically does that suggest there is some sort of hierarchical nature to the Trinity. Yeah certainly there is differentiation and as you say the classic passages are things like when Jesus says no one knows about this not even the Son but only the Father and indeed though it's ambiguous when the rich young ruler says good master or good teacher and Jesus says why do you call me good no one is good but God alone and some people have thought that Jesus was hinting don't you realize who I actually am and others have thought no he's he's saying the standard Jewish thing so those teas us into saying there is a differentiation and after all in Gethsemane and then on the cross we have those agonizing moments when Jesus says Father if there is some other way please take this cup away nevertheless not my will but yours as though there are two wills going on there is the Father's will and the Son's will and the Son is prepared to subordinate his will to the Father's will and that then leads us into all sorts of quite complicated discussions about what is going on if you like in Jesus own psyche if Jesus is the second person of the Trinity does this mean that Jesus has two wills a human will and a divine will nothing in the story of the gospels seems to imply that Jesus is in any way schizophrenic like that so how do we read those and then on the cross when Jesus says my God my God why did you abandon me it won't do simply to say oh well he's quoting Psalm 22 so he didn't really mean it quite as sharply as it sounds I think for Matthew and Mark who quote that saying it really is as stark as that so we have to allow for that and yes for those passages about learning obedience and so on but the part of the problem that we have with the idea of hierarchy is precisely the language of master and slave and and I would be aware of importing a modern western idea of a hierarchy a kind of chain of command simply into that very rich and dense language of the New Testament because when Jesus is praying to the father and particularly when he calls him Abba Father there seems to be an intimacy an extraordinary union which the idea of hierarchy would rule out as in a hierarchy you're just looking up rather in all whereas there seems to be an amazing relationship of love and again the passage in Matthew 11 I quoted before where Jesus rejoices and says I thank you Father that you hid these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes and all things are given to me by the Father and so on and so on that there seems to be an easy confluence of of agenda of things to be done of things to be understood between the Father and the Son and that goes all the way to the great prayer in John 17 the great so-called high priestly prayer where Jesus and the Father seem to be completely at one even though Jesus then has to go and do something from which he in John 12 already says he shrinks now is my soul troubled he says in John 12 rather like the Gethsemane is seen in in Matthew and Mark so I'm simply really walking around the question when it comes to Jesus sitting or standing the sitting image at the right hand of God goes back particularly to Daniel 7 where there is a throne and the Son of Man or one like a Son of Man sits on the throne beside the ancient of days and when the New Testament talks about Jesus sitting at God's right hand that is a combination of

Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 it doesn't I think literally mean that there is somewhere in some metaphysical world an actual throne and here is God and he has Jesus at his right hand and it's it's a way of saying this is the fulfillment of Psalm 110 and of Daniel 7 and when Jesus is standing there this seems to be the priestly position of intercession as indeed in Romans 8 Jesus intercedes for his people it is clear that he is interceding for Stephen the first martyr so I don't think we should play these off against one another we should rather find ourselves drawn into the mystery it remains a mystery and we are drawn into the mystery of God and God's presence by being the people the people of Jesus the people for whom Jesus died the people who know Jesus as the risen Lord it seems to me again and again the New Testament is saying that's who we are and as we are Jesus people so we are God's people and the relationship that the believer has with Jesus interestingly in the New Testament is often modeled on the relationship in the Old Testament between Israel and Yahweh Israel as Yahweh's bride so the church as Jesus bride and these are of course images which point to depths of intimacy and depths of reality the reality of God himself which it's hard for us to go beyond metaphor and maybe that's just as well that's where we have to be it it leads helpful as well into the final question from Beck in Georgia US who wants to know sort of how how all this sort of you know intense mystery and adoption in a sense applies to our devotional life says in the last few years in my Bible reading I've come to believe the triune communal nature of God is incredibly important but it's not something I hear taught very much or that Christians I know talk about it's would seem we can't understand God creation the church or ourselves unless we recognize that everything flows from this communal nature of God now am I right in believing this in John 17 it appears Jesus is praying that his followers and all those who would follow would experience God's communal nature for themselves becoming one with the Trinity one with each other and that seems a fantastic almost impossible goal is that what Jesus was asking of his followers that we would be part of the Trinity with him that kind of intimacy with God is an astonishing gift if it's true far more than just simply being saved from sin so them not punished kind of thinking so thank thank you for this question Beck how how then do you think we should see those words of Jesus in especially in John's gospel about the father and I and so on and obviously the gift of the spirit all interwoven and and the yes is this how easy it is it to kind of make that part of our discipleship and and relationship with God and each other Tom yes a great question from Beck and I very much appreciate what is said at the end there and this is far more than a being saved from sin so that I'm not punished which yeah it's much better to know that I'm saved from sin and not punished than not to know that that's be quite clear there's nothing wrong with notion that I am basically a sinner and that to my astonishment God's grace has reached out to me and because of what Jesus did on the cross I am saved from possible horrors that would result from my sin etc so I'm not saying anything that there's anything wrong with that but that that doesn't tell the whole biblical story and the older I get and Justin you've heard me say this before the older I get the more I realize that the biblical story is not about how we get to God despite our sin it's how God comes to dwell with us despite our sin and how

God coming to dwell with us renews the whole world exactly as he promises in the Old Testament and those great promises about the earth being full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea those actually reach out and embrace us as human beings particularly because if we're made in the image of God then if God says that about the whole creation being suffused with his presence how much more does he intend that his image-bearing creatures should be filled with his own life and and so on so when we find then in the New Testament Paul's saying that one day God will be all in all we shouldn't be surprised if that is then focused particularly on the human beings who are Jesus people who are following who are grasped by the gospel and following Jesus in his way and so in John's gospel particularly and it's not surprising that Beck goes for John 17 because that is one of the quintessential passages on this although you'd find the same in say Ephesians chapter three and several other passages as well the sense is that if God is going to flood the whole creation with his love with his presence with his joy with his mercy with his delight then the gospel is about Jesus himself coming to bring all that into the world and then Jesus spirit is given to his followers so that they become small working models of new creation and the new creation is where that flooding with God's presence is to take place.

Now in the Eastern Orthodox traditions and some in the West as well this has been spoken of in terms of Theosis or divinization many in the Western traditions particularly the Protestant traditions have been worried about that because it sounds though I'm saying that I become God which instantly might lead to pride or arrogance or whatever and to be honest that could never happen if it is the true God that we're talking about because if the true God is the one we know in Jesus then we find straight away that he is the one who though he was in the form of God did not regard his equality with God as something to take advantage of but emptied himself and so on and the picture of this is how we know who God is when we look at Jesus particularly his humility his gentleness is going to the cross as an act of extraordinary love so if we want even for a second to imagine being filled with the fullness of God as Paul says in Ephesians 3 it is this God that we're talking about not some big powerful bullying God that's always the danger particularly I think in Western theology so it's when we look at Jesus and when we look at the story about God coming to dwell with his people we say it looks as though that's the point of the gift of the Spirit that in anticipation in the present we are to be small working models of that coming new creation in which the earth will be full of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea and once we begin to glimpse that all sorts of other passages in Scripture click into place but they don't do so to make us comfortable they do so as a vocation as a challenge is my praying is my living actually even beginning to look like that such a helpful episode in coming to grips with both the the intellectual questions that the Trinity theories are but also the very practical question of living our life in the light of that communal nature of God and and his gift of Jesus the Spirit and the Father but thank you so much for taking us through that Tom and we look forward to being with you again next time but for now thanks very much and see you then well thank you for

being with us on today's program brought to you by Premier Unbelievable helping you to understand defend and share your faith with confidence just a quick reminder we've some exciting seminars in June and July guests joining me at these free events include Michaela Peterson daughter of the famed psychologist Jordan Peterson and YouTuber John McCray asking is Gen Z ready to believe in God again it's going to be a great conversation you can book in to be part of it absolutely free at [unbelievable.live](https://unbelievable.live) the link is with today's show for now see you next time [ Silence ]