

In the image of God - What others believe 14

Aim of lesson

To enable the young people to understand the difference between the doctrine of the trinity and Bible teaching, and why it matters.

Bible background

The key passages are perhaps from the gospel of John - 5:19; 7:16; 10:34-36; 12:49; 14:7-9; 20:17. Colossians 1:15-19 is a passage you may like to spend some time considering in detail by way of preparation.

Preparation required

If you have any material of your own about the doctrine of the trinity or the way it developed, look through it and consider whether to use it in the lesson.

Read through the lesson and consider which parts the young people will find most useful. There is plenty of material there and unless you have a lot of time you will need to summarise some sections.

It is always difficult in a lesson which is based upon misunderstandings of the scripture to keep positive and to avoid sounding defensive. It is important to have a balance in the way you allocate time, and to make sure that you are able to end on a positive note.

Suggested outline of lesson

The lesson deals with four main points.

1. The doctrine of the trinity is not taught in the Bible; it was developed gradually, over several centuries of argument.
2. The doctrine teaches that the Lord Jesus existed as a separate person before his birth, and that he is, and always has been, a part of a triune Godhead. (The subject of the holy spirit has been already discussed, so that aspect of trinitarian teaching is not covered further here.)
3. The lesson then goes on to look at some of the passages which are used to justify the doctrine of the trinity to see whether they do.
4. Finally it considers the impact that the doctrine has on other aspects of Bible teaching.

The doctrine of the trinity - the great divide

Explain to the young people what this lesson is about and ask them what they understand of the doctrine of the trinity.

Talk with the young people about this doctrine. You will no doubt have personal experience of people telling you that because you do not believe in the trinity you are 'beyond the pale' so far as salvation is concerned. The Athanasian creed begins by saying that anyone who does not believe it will 'perish everlastingly'; and the Catholic Encyclopaedia says that it is the central doctrine of the Christian religion (see the quotations in the students' notes).

The development of the teaching

Get the young people to look at the quotations from The New Encyclopaedia Britannica and the New Catholic Encyclopaedia. They sum up the essence of the first part of this lesson: that the doctrine of the trinity is not taught in the Bible, but evolved over many years.

Then look at the text of the creeds which follow. In each case ask the young people to read through the text on their own or in small groups, highlighting what they think are the main points.

The Apostles' Creed

Get the group to read this and tell you what they think of it. In general it is a faithful summary of the gospel. There is no doubt much that we might like to add to it, but so far as it goes it is something to which we would assent.

The Nicene Creed

This has the same basic structure as the Apostles' Creed: a statement about God, one about the Lord Jesus, and a third about the holy spirit. There is however, no teaching of the trinity as such. Ask the young people what they think of it, and if there are any points they want to make. Some obvious points are:

- Much of it is scriptural, and is carried forward from the Apostles' Creed.
- It has several additional clauses, several of which contain language that has no obvious meaning, such as 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God'; 'of one substance with the Father', and so on.
- Although it does not include the holy spirit in a trinity, it does speak of it as a person - 'the Lord and giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets'.

You will want to spend some time on passages which demonstrate that these teachings are false, but it is best to wait until you have spent some time on the Athanasian Creed.

It is interesting to note that the council of Nicaea also prohibited the keeping of Jewish feasts, such as the passover, and made Easter (named after Ishtar - a Babylonian goddess) obligatory. The church was taking deliberate steps away from the Jewish roots of the gospel. The Jewishness of Jesus was inconvenient, and the doctrine of the trinity places all the emphasis on the fatherhood of God rather than on the humanity Jesus inherited from his Jewish mother. The later doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary takes this one step further, in even denying the true humanity of Mary.

The Athanasian Creed

This appears to have been produced by a number of authors in the late 4th century or first half of the 5th century AD. Get the young people to appreciate that:

- It doesn't make sense. The church explains this by saying that it is all a profound mystery. In a sense of course, they are right: the Almighty God is beyond our comprehension, and the day we pretend otherwise we are in trouble; but that is no excuse for this sort of gobbledegook.
- It contradicts itself, repeatedly following one statement with another which denies it.
- It teaches that there are three gods, even though it says it does not.
- It says that the Son was begotten, which must imply a beginning, but that he is eternal.
- It teaches that 'none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another,' even though Jesus made it clear that he could do nothing except what his Father wanted him to do.

It is almost unnecessary to use scripture to demonstrate that this is no statement of truth, but you may like to use a few references simply to point out that:

There is one and only one God

A passage such as 1 Timothy 2:5 should suffice to illustrate the point.

The Lord Jesus could do nothing without his Father

John 8:28, for instance, demonstrates that Jesus was taught by his Father and did not act or speak on his own behalf.

The holy spirit is God's power

The relationship with the Father and the Lord Jesus is well explained in Acts 10:38, which demonstrates that the spirit is the power of God, which is subservient to him. Similarly, John 20:22 demonstrates a similar relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Passages of scripture that are used to support the teaching

This set of passages has been used not because it is complete but because it comes from a non-Christadelphian source, so the young people will not feel that we have chosen verses that are easy to explain.

Get the young people to look at some or all of these passages, maybe in pairs, and to make notes about how they think they should be read. You will no doubt need to help them.

Reference	Notes
Matthew 28:19	It is through Christ that we are saved, and through his Spirit that God works. So these words express a simple truth.
Luke 3:21,22	This says nothing of three eternal persons.
2 Peter 1:17	God is the Father, of course.
John 1:1-3,14	These verses lie at the root of the problem of the doctrine of the trinity, and the confusion arises because it sounds as though the word, the logos, is a separate person. In fact the Greek word translated 'him' (autos) can mean he, she, or it. The word often applies to God in other places - John 4:24 for example.
John 8:24,58	This was discussed in the previous lesson.
Colossians 1:15-19	Verse 15 is no doubt explained by verse 18: Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Verse 16 suggests that it was Jesus who made all things. However, the passage is demonstrating his pre-eminence, and perhaps a better translation would be 'for', or 'in' 'him were all things created'.
Titus 2:13	Jesus was a revelation of God when he first came - no doubt even greater when he returns. It is worth noting that the Greek is ambiguous - compare the AV and NIV translations to see how.

Acts 13:2; Acts 10:19-20; Hebrews 3:7-11; Acts 5:3,4	These passages all record the holy spirit speaking, but there is no suggestion that a person was present. They are explained by the third passage. Just as, by his spirit, God inspired the prophets in the Old Testament, he is now speaking by his spirit to the apostles.
Hebrews 9:14	The spirit comes from the eternal God, and is eternal, as he is.

Some helpful passages

This is where you can end on a positive note. If you have time, look at them with the young people; if you cannot do this, you can at least refer to them and turn to one or two examples. Your class may like to read the rest as homework.

So why does it matter?

The young people will probably have little understanding of why the doctrine of the trinity might have a damaging effect on other aspects of our faith, but if you have time it is worth talking it over with them.

The scriptures emphasise very strongly that there is one God who is responsible for all things in the universe. Other religions have constantly invented a pantheon of Gods, with different characteristics, which have laid the ground for all sorts of false teachings. To have three gods may not seem a major step in that direction, but it must surely have contributed to the situation in the Roman church where a plethora of saints is worshipped, and prayers are offered to all sorts of individuals. The Almighty God becomes a shadowy figure in the background. It is important that we keep in our perspective the relationship between the one God, the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, the mediator by whom we come to God.

Some specific impacts of the doctrine of the trinity are these:

- The sacrifice of Jesus and his victory over sin become much less meaningful if we believe that the Lord Jesus is God the Son, who had existed in the heavens since the beginning of time. It hard to understand how his life on earth could have contained real temptations to which he could have succumbed, with the prospect of real death if he had. Could it be possible that one person in a triune Godhead could really perish because of his sin?
- Unless Jesus was truly human, and was in reality tempted just like us, he cannot be a sympathetic high priest, as is explained in Hebrews 2:17-18. Some protest that it is blasphemous to speak of Jesus being tempted to act violently or immorally, but we know that he must have been. God cannot be tempted, and it is hard to understand therefore how God the Son could have been.
- Mary has to have been a special person to have been the 'mother of God', and so a variety of other false teachings arise.

Postscript

One sometimes gets the feeling when speaking with those who say they believe in the trinity that what they really believe is much closer to the truth than the Athanasian Creed, and that they have been saddled with an incomprehensible form of words they would much rather be without.

We should be careful not to speak as though everyone in 'mainstream Christendom' believes what the Creed teaches, and in practice should take care to listen to what people really say before producing 'standard' responses.

You may like to discuss this with the young people and to see whether they have had practical experience of discussing this subject with others.

Relevance to our lives

This doctrine has considerable impact on our relationship with those in other denominations. We have many reasons for retaining a separate identity, and if we were asked to prioritise them we might put other topics higher than this. From the point of view of most other denominations, however, this is the reason why we are regarded as a 'sect' or a 'cult'.

Prayer

Almighty Lord, we recognise that you are beyond our comprehension. It is sad that men have written of your teachings that are not right and that these became a source of division in your church. Help us in humility to seek to understand your nature and in gentleness to teach others the truth. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

1. You may like to discuss the belief of Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe that Jesus was made by God as the first of his creative acts (Colossians 1:15-17) and that he lived in glory in heaven throughout Old Testament times (John 8:23; 17:5). He is the archangel Michael, who appeared to Daniel (Daniel 10:13; 12:1) and who after his crucifixion fought against the devil in heaven (Revelation 12:7-12). They then go on to interpret the archangel in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 as referring to the Lord Jesus.
2. How would you cope with someone who says that you are not a Christian because you do not believe the trinity? What would you say?