

The Holy Trinity Part 1: John 17:11 - Shared Nature

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[0 : 0 0] Now as we come to church each week, our great aim, well one of our great aims is to learn more about God. We are here to worship God but we're also here to learn about Him and there's nothing, nothing greater for us to study. If you look back over the last week I'm sure that every one of us in here have learned things over the past week or over the past month, we're constantly learning but the best thing that we can learn about is God and as we come to God's word tonight we are engaging in the greatest science of all, the study of God. And one of the amazing things about the Bible is that it reveals God to us. God isn't inaccessible, He isn't unfathomable, He isn't cut off from our knowledge, He is revealed to us in God's word and that means that every time we have our Bible open we are doing something amazing. We are on holy ground, God is revealing Himself to us. And of course that should shape our attitude as we come to God's word. We should be excited but also humbled and also in a spirit of reverence. So we're here to study

God but what do you think of God? Or maybe I should ask it, when you think about God when I mention that word, that little word, what comes to your mind? What immediately do you think of when you say the word God? Who and what is God? Well that's bringing us to the topic that I want us to spend a few weeks looking at at our Sunday evening services. I want us to look at God, the Holy Trinity. We're going to spend time thinking about the Trinity. Now the Trinity is an extraordinary doctrine and at one level it's going to stretch our minds because the Trinity is beyond our comprehension at certain levels and so we really really are stepping into the great depths of theology here but I know you all and I know that you can cope with that and I know that you are keen to learn and so at one level our minds are going to be stretched but at another level I hope that it will make our hearts burn within us because it teaches us just what a glorious, glorious God we have.

At one level the Trinity emphasises just the sheer beyondness of God. God is beyond what we can imagine, beyond what we can describe, beyond what we can fully comprehend but yet at the same time as I hope we will see the Trinity emphasises the amazing nearness of God to each one of us and we are worshipping the God who is altogether beyond us and yet who is intimately and personally with us. And we're going to look at various aspects of the Trinity and we're going to primarily focus on the teaching in John's Gospel. We'll be thinking about really the doctrine as a whole as the Bible reveals it but I am certainly planning that it will be mostly things in John's Gospel that we use as our starting point and certainly that's the case tonight because we read John chapter 17 and in that chapter there is a tiny little phrase that I want us to think about. It appears in verse 11 and in verse 22. See if you can spot the phrase that's in both verses. I am no longer in the world but they are in the world and I am coming to you holy Father keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one. The glory that you have given me I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one. The verses are very similar and I want us to focus on the last three words in each verse that tiny little phrase we are one. And one of the amazing things about the Bible is that it can take the simplest of phrases that's three words and they're tiny words two letters three letters and yet the simplest of phrases can teach the most profound things because look at that phrase we are one. Can you see what's remarkable about that? What's remarkable about those three words? Well think about it. We is plural isn't it? We is more than one but one is singular.

One is one and so that phrase we are one although it's simple it's actually incredibly complicated and it's forcing us to think what exactly does this mean. And in these three words Jesus is revealing to us the foundational truth that lies under the doctrine of the Trinity.

There is a we and yet they are one. That's the truth at the heart of who God is. When you think of God we should be thinking of this. God is one but within that oneness there is a more than oneness. There is a we. We're going to focus on these three words and we're going to structure our study into two halves tonight. First of all we're going to focus on the we. Jesus says we are one. Now in this context in verse 11 in John 17 the primary emphasis is on the relationship between the Father and the Son because Jesus is praying to his Father so in many ways it's between God the Son and God the Father and that's a key theme that runs throughout the whole of the Gospel of John. The fact that God the

[6 : 26] Father and God the Son are one. In fact that's the very first thing he says in the Gospel. In the beginning was the word. Now the word is referring to Jesus. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And we could spend weeks looking at that sentence alone. Verse 18 in chapter 1 says the same thing. No one has ever seen God the only God who is at the Father's side he has made him known. So that verse is saying that there is God and yet there is a God who is beside God. The God who is at the Father's side he has made God known. Of course it's referring to the Father and the Son. But alongside this in the Gospel of John there is the very clear emphasis that along with God the Father and God the Son there is also God the Holy Spirit. John 14. Now I will ask the Father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever. Even the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him for he dwells with you and will be in you. And that's a really interesting exercise. If you go home and you read John chapter 14, 15, 16, 17 and think about Father, Son and Spirit, about how many times they are mentioned. And in chapter 14 and chapter 16 there's this great emphasis on the Spirit and even in John 17 when Jesus talks about being in his people he's pointing us to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And so the collective teaching of

John's Gospel and the Scripture as a whole is that the we of the Trinity is a relationship of three in one. Now how do we understand this? And what do we mean? Well at one level we are we're going to the limits of our understanding and we're going to the limits of our powers of expression. And you have to always remember that God will forever be unsearchable. God will forever be beyond the limits of our minds and there will always always be depths that we cannot reach. And of course that's just logical because only God is God. Only God operates at that level and we most definitely don't. So at one level we're stretching and we're limited. But we can't just say oh well the Trinity is a complete mystery because that's not true. The Bible does reveal certain things to us therefore there are some things that we can say and there's some things that we can be sure about and it's really important that we do say them and that we do understand them. And this is where our catechism is really really helpful. Whenever you come to big theological questions go to the catechism. If you don't have it on your phone you can get an app with the catechism on it. Really helpful, really good. If you don't have a phone then you can easily buy a copy of it. And if you don't come and see me and I'll print off a copy for you. Catechism is brilliant. Let's look at questions four, five and six. What is God? God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Question five, are there more gods than one? There is but one only, the living and through God. How many persons either in the Godhead? There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the

Holy Ghost. These three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Now question six is really important because it uses two key theological terms. It uses the word substance and the word person. And these are really important for understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. God has one substance or you might use the term nature or essence or being or even if you like you could say Godness. And that's a foundational biblical truth that there is only one who possesses that substance, only one God. That's what we said at the very beginning, here Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. So we are monotheists. The Christian faith is a monotheistic faith. We are not polytheists, poly many.

And so you have the religions of the nations in the Old Testament where they believe in multiple gods. Remember the pagan gods of Baal and all of these things. You can think of the Greek gods, the Roman gods. And even today we have faith groups like Hindus who have a plethora of gods. We are not like that. We are monotheists. We do not believe in three gods. We believe in one. And so God is one nature. He has one nature that are not different types of God. There cannot be. There is only one. And we're going to think about that oneness in a wee while. But this one nature God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And an absolutely wonderful phrase that the Catechism gives us. But within that one nature God, there are three equal persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And each of these is fully

God in and of and from himself. They are the same in substance, equal in power and glory. And the Bible makes that very clear. The Bible confirms that each of these persons are fully God. And so we can see that in the examples. You could pick numerous texts, but God the Father is God. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. John 1, 1, in the beginning was the word. That's in reference to God, the Son. The word was with God. The word was God. Acts chapter five, verse three, Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? Remember that phrase? And to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land. While it remained unsold, did you not, it did not remain your own. And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived in this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias, when Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he was lying to

[13 : 18] God himself. And so therefore, when we think of God, we are thinking of the God who has one nature and three persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And that's exactly what we find on the pages of scripture. Even in Genesis chapter one, which we read this morning, first chapter of the Bible, it says, then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness. That's the language of we, isn't it? And then you come to the New Testament and it's made abundantly clear. The baptism of Jesus is a good example. In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth, Afghanistan was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up over the water, up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the spirit, there's one descending on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven. That's the Father's voice. You are my beloved Son. With you, I am well pleased.

The spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. So there you have the three persons clearly working together. And then Matthew 28 19. This is, I think my favorite Trinitarian text of all because look at what it says. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Now look at that. You've got three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three.

But yet they are all one name, baptizing them in the name of these three. And so there you have the three in one perfectly and gloriously emphasized. And this word, Persian is very helpful because it highlights the fact that each of these three Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they have personal qualities. They are, there are qualities that are personal to the Father.

There are qualities that are personal to the Son. And there are other qualities that are personal to the Holy Spirit. We can distinguish between them. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father. And when you look at the teaching about God, you see that they relate to each other in a personal way. If we look at examples, you see that they speak to each other, just like we speak to people. Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, Father, that's God speaking to himself. That's the persons of the Godhead speaking. So they speak to each other. They make agreements with each other.

I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. So a really important text pointing us back to the fact that at some point in eternity, God the Father and God the Son agreed that the Son would do some work. That's a great topic. I could so easily get sidetracked on that, but I mustn't. They agree with one another. And following on from that, they work together. Look at that. The helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name. He will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you. Look at how the Son, the Spirit, the Father are working together.

[16 : 44] That personalness where they work with one another. They even help each other. Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee. And most gloriously of all, they love each other. A voice came from heaven. You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.

That's why the word person is helpful because the persons of the Godhead deal with one another. And in a personal way. They also relate to us in a personal way. Each person speaks to us. We know things that the Father has said. We know things that the Son has said. We know things that the Spirit has said. Each person acts towards us. We know that the Father has done certain things. We know that the Son has done certain things. And we know that the Spirit has done certain things for us. And each person loves us. The Father loves us.

The Son loves us. The Spirit loves us. God in all His fullness. In all His indescribable fullness loves you. And here we are gazing into the depths of the glory of God. And we see that God's nature is a shared nature. That's what I've attempted as a title for this. It's very hard to pick titles to talk about the Trinity because it's so big. But a shared nature is what we see. God's nature is shared between Father, Son and Spirit.

And that has some glorious implications. It means that at the core of God's being there is fellowship. This working together. At the core of God's being there is friendship.

You look at that relationship of friendship. At the core of God's being there is cooperation. That's at the heart of God's nature. And at the core of God's being there is love. And this means that by nature there is never, ever any selfishness in God. With God it's never about me. It is always and eternally we. God has never existed in an individualistic self-interest. There has always been this cooperation and this fellowship. There is never any thoughtlessness in God. You think of it that, how often are we thoughtless when we just put ourselves first at the expense of others? God is never, ever like that. The kind of coldness and arrogance that is prioritised in the world today is an unknown to God. Even though God is high, even though God is better than anything else, even though God is more important than anything else, yet there is never a kind of arrogant selfish thoughtlessness in God. And there is never ever loneliness in God. And that's one of the reasons why God is worth gazing at.

[20 : 14] Because there you look at God, Father, Son and Spirit. You are seeing an eternal relationship of love and fellowship, of companionship, of intimacy. Being alone and isolated is not in God's nature. That's not God's way at all. And this is why if you are fed up of the world, if you are fed up of the selfishness of this life, if you are fed up of the thoughtlessness of your fellow human beings, if you have been battered and bruised, if you are weary of the loneliness of life, God is so wonderfully different. At his very core, his very nature, there is a we, three persons in one perfect nature. So there's a we, but Jesus says we are one. And as we said, when we talk about the three persons of the Trinity, we are absolutely not saying that there are three gods. I think that that is one of Islam's arguments against

Christianity. They say you believe in three gods. We don't. We believe in one God. And Jesus makes that very clear by saying we are one. Now there's an interesting word. What does one mean? It sounds so simple, doesn't it? But yet one can mean so much. And I'm actually going to say seven things. One refers to seven things. Don't worry, they're brief, they're seven glorious things. First of all, one means unique, doesn't it? Now I admit that's probably not at the forefront of what Jesus is referring to in John 17, but it's still a theological truth from scripture. God is unique. God is one and he is the only one. He's the only one who has that God nature, that substance. No one else and nothing else has that. And so we look at ourselves, we have human nature, don't we? That's what makes us human. We have human nature and billions of other human beings have it as well. But God nature, Godness, that substance which defines God as God, it belongs to only one. Only one.

It belongs to God, the Holy Trinity. And so by definition God's nature is unique. That's why we shouldn't be surprised that the Trinity is not something that we find in everyday life.

It's unique. God, the Holy Trinity has a one-off unique nature. He has a three in one nature and that belongs to him alone. That's why we should never be surprised by the unfathomableness and mysteriousness of the doctrine of the Trinity because it's unique. Nothing compares to God. Nothing else has this nature. By definition God's unique nature is a single nature shared among three. And so God's Godness, if you like, I'm struggling for words here, but God's Godness is shared between Father, Son and Spirit, but it is exclusively God's.

[24 : 21] It belongs only to this Trinity. So the Trinity is part of what makes God gloriously unique. That's just in a category of his own. Absolute category of his own. But do you know what is amazing? This unique God is not keeping his unique Godness to himself. He's in a category of his own and he could dwell in perfect, complete isolation so he wished. But that's not what he wants. God is gladly and openly sharing himself with you. That's exactly what God means when he says, I will be your God. He's saying, I will be God for you. I will devote all of my God nature to you. And so the God who dwells in a category of his own is coming before you tonight and he's saying, I will be your God. God is unique. So one means unique. One also means complete, doesn't it? If you do fractions in school, I remember,

I was quite good at maths, but fractions was never my strong point. If you do fractions in school, you know that one is one. One is complete. And so one speaks to us of fullness and completeness, not half, not three quarters, not 90%, but a whole. And it is these three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, that come together as a complete whole. They make God one. Therefore God is not God without the Son or without the Father or without the Spirit.

It is this three personness that is essential to make God complete, to make God who he is. And so the Father and the Son and the Spirit, they can look upon each other and they can see their own completeness fulfilled in one another. And that means that God never comes short. He's never found wanting. He is never lacking. The whole eternity is a perfect fullness of God. Now, this is where the polytheistic religions of the world fall so far short.

Because a God of wind or a God of rain or a God of fertility or a God of power is really a picture of impotent weakness because they are gods that can only do so much. They just fulfill a tiny, tiny part of what God should be able to do. And the modern day idols of the world are just the same. Money can seem so powerful, but all too often money is powerless, isn't it? Possessions seem like they can do so much, but yet so often they leave you empty.

And maybe pleasures, pastimes, interests, they can fill a void for a wee while, but only for a wee while. God is different because God is one. He is complete. He is a complete God. And that means that he can give you everything that you need. Everything that you need for life, for death and eternity. God is not going to save you three quarters of the way or 90 percent of the way. God does not do things in half or three quarter measures. God is one. By definition, he is complete. And his actions, his saving work in people like you is done to the uttermost. Now, it's really interesting to notice something. The Trinity is one of the big, what's the word? It's one of the big divisive issues between Christianity and other religions. And you have religions like Islam, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, they deny the Trinity. That's one of the big problems that they have. They think it's impossible. It's not true. They deny it. But these very same religions are also the religions that deny the fullness of God's saving work. Because they all say that we have to do something.

[29 : 44] I remember speaking to some Mormons who came to the community buffet and I said to them, how are you saved? And they said, by believing in Jesus and doing my best. And so, yeah, they say that God will do so much, but we have to do a bit. And Islam will say the same, you must fulfill the five pillars. You must make sure that you do what you need. And so they are all limiting God's saving work. They're all saying God will do so much. But we have to do a bit ourselves. And in doing so, they think that they are defending the oneness of God. But in reality, do you see that they are actually making God less, far less than one? Because they're saying what God is doing is not sufficient. And not enough. God is one. And there is a fullness and a completeness to all that he does. So one means unique, one means complete. Thirdly, one means relational. And this is really what comes to mind primarily in John chapter 14 to 17. Here you see the depth and the intimacy of the relationship between the father, the son and the spirit. They are so close. They are one. There is a perfect relationship of love, of fellowship and of togetherness. And from all eternity, that's how God has been loving and sharing and enjoying. And so God is a relational God.

There is a oneness, a unity within that relationship. And so think of God. Think of father, son and spirit. Think of that perfect relationship. Just stretch your mind to think about that.

You think there couldn't be a more perfect relationship. And yet you know what the Bible is saying? It's saying that God wants to bring you into that relationship. God wants to make you part of that. So what John 17 23 says, I in them and you in me that they may be perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me. How much does God love you? How much does God love you? As much as he loves himself. As much as he loves his own dear son. And so the father, the son and the spirit are bound together in the closest, strongest, most tender loving relationship. And there is room in that relationship for you. Never ever doubt that. No matter how much you might feel that you are not worthy of it. It's a theological truth. There's room in that relationship for you. One means harmonious, doesn't it? When we are one with each other, we are in harmony, aren't we? Whether it's a family or workplace, congregation, when we are one, we are in harmony.

And God is one. He is in perfect harmony with himself. And isn't that glorious? You think of the Trinity, there is never any disagreement, never any competition, never any envy, never any resentment. You look at the Old Testament and the foreign religions of the nation surrounding Israel, they had gods who were constantly fighting with each other, constantly tense, constantly aggressive towards one another. The God of the Bible is wonderfully different.

Because there is never any tension in the Trinity. There is one shared will, one united purpose, one collective enthusiasm and passion. There is a harmony there. And do you know that harmony was tested, was tested to its limits where? In the Garden of Gethsemane and yet what did Jesus say? Your will be done. And so all plans are shared plans, all goals are shared goals.

[34 : 47] And these are accomplished by God working together in perfect harmony. That's one of the reasons why God can give us peace and rest. It's why he's the one who gives us a peace that passes all understanding because at the very core of God's being is harmony.

And if you are tense, and if life is hard, you need that peace and harmony that only God can give. One means harmonious. One means equal. That's true as well. And in fact that's incredibly important because the three persons of the Godhead are all equal. That means that you can never ever, ever arrange Father, Son and Spirit in any order of importance or ability or divinity. That's what many, many false religions have done. They put the Father at the top, the Son underneath and the Spirit somewhere. We see it in so many places. But the Catechism is brilliantly clear and helpful in this because it says these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. And the false teaching that comes from this has affected so many religions. If you look again at Islam, Mormonism and Jehovah's Witness, they talk a lot about

Jesus, but they all say Jesus is not God. But he is. And we must never, ever place Jesus lower than God. That's what we call subordination, where Jesus is seen as less than the Father. It's a false heresy. Because in terms of the nature of God, God's nature is fully and equally shared.

There is equality. So the Godness of the Father is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. The Godness of the Son is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And the Godness of the Spirit is infinite and eternal and unchangeable. God is one in perfect equality. And that should shape the way we worship.

Shouldn't it? Because we are worshiping God. And so we are worshiping the Father and praising him for his glorious character and attributes. We are worshiping the Son, marveling at his Persian and work. And we are worshiping the Holy Spirit, delighting in his presence and in his power. We are worshiping the Holy Trinity in all his fullness. One means equal. That's a really important one. Sixth, we're nearly there. We'll try and be done by seven. Sixth, one means unanimous.

[37 : 40] That's another very important point. Within God, there is one will. There's one intelligence. There is one purpose. There is one Creator, one power, one glory, one majesty. Therefore what pleases the Father pleases the Son and the Spirit. What the Son delights in, the Father and the Spirit delight in. What the Spirit treasures the Father and the Son treasure. And of course the opposite is two when we disobey one, we disobey them all. When we grieve one, we grieve them all. And this raises a really important point in terms of what you think of Jesus. Because I think we often meet people who will say that they believe in God and yet they don't have much thought of Jesus. But you can't have God without Jesus. You just can't. Whoever believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. Jesus says in John chapter 12.

And so it should shape the way we think of Jesus and of the Spirit. There is a unanimity. But the unanimity of God, the Trinity teaches us another very precious truth. It tells us that God is unanimously committed to you. God's commitment to you is a unanimous commitment. The Father is willing to give his Son for you. The Son is willing to give his life for you. The Spirit is willing to make his dwelling in you. God is for you. He is unanimously committed to you. And if

God is for us, who can be against us? Lastly, one means united. This reminds us that even though we can distinguish between the persons of the Trinity, we can never ever ever separate them.

And maybe this is the one thing I want you to grasp in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. You've been very patient tonight because we've covered a lot of ground. But I want you to grasp this. Although we can distinguish between Father, Son and Spirit, we can never ever separate them.

God is united. He is indivisible. You cannot separate Father, Son and Spirit. You cannot have one without the other. And so the Father is God in and of himself. The Son is God in and of himself.

[40 : 48] The Spirit is God in and of himself. God is the Father. God is the Son. God is the Holy Spirit. And God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now that, yes, is an unsearchable mystery, but it is a glorious reality. And so that means when you are thinking of Jesus, you are thinking of God. When you are thinking of the Holy Spirit, you are thinking of God. When you are thinking of the Father, you are thinking of God. When you pray to the Father, you're praying to God. When you pray to Jesus, you're praying to God. When you pray to the Spirit, you're praying to God. And so, yes, the Triune God has a shared nature, but there is an absolutely unbreakable unity between them.

And that's because their nature is shared. There's an unbreakable unity between God, the Father, God, the Son and God, the Spirit. They are one. But the amazing teaching of John 17 is this. That indivisible nature of God, that indivisibleness of God is the measure of how secure you are if you put your trust in Jesus. You again at John 17, 11, I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I'm coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. Do you see what Jesus is saying? He is saying, keep them. Keep my people in Carlyway. Keep every person who trusts in me, even though they are weak and they stumble and they find things hard and they maybe don't understand everything. Father, keep them. And the measure of that keeping is the unity of the Trinity itself.

That's what that verse is saying. Jesus is using the nature of God as the benchmark for your eternal security. That means that your safety, if you trust in Jesus, is bound up with the oneness of God. In other words, just as God cannot be separated from himself, so you cannot be separated from him. That's what Jesus says in John 10. My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. And then we have a Trinitarian comment. I and the Father are one.

Now I want you to stretch your mind to think of the indivisible unity of the Triune God.

Because when you do that, you are getting a glimpse of how safe you are if you trust in Jesus.

[44 : 44] That's how safe you are. So God's nature is a shared nature among Father, Son and Spirit, one God. And he is sharing all that he is with you. That's what God's offering you. Let's pray.