



NextStep 102: Core Beliefs of the Christian Faith



Week #2 – The Trinity¹

Key Concepts:

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Progressively Revealed in Scripture
Three Statements Summarize Biblical Teaching
All Analogies Have Shortcomings
Implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Preface: We must think **rightly/correctly** about God.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

(A. W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy)

Three Major Worldviews (or Views about God):

1. **Atheism**: God does not exist. Also known as secularism, increasingly accepted in “public” institutions.
2. **Pantheism**: Everything that exists is God. Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism) are examples of Pantheism.
3. **Theism**: God is eternal and personal. He created everything. Examples include Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Mormonism (Polytheism), etc.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Progressively Revealed in Scripture

The term **“Trinity”** is never found in the Bible. “Trinity” means “tri-unity” or “three-in-oneness.” Why then do we use this term? Where did it come from?

Remember the idea of **progressive** revelation The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years. God revealed His truth to humanity over time instead of all at once from the start.

¹ Much of the material in these notes is taken directly from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, 1994.

1) Partial Revelation in the Old Testament

- a. While the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly spelled out in the Old Testament, certain passages imply that God's "oneness" is composite and **unique**: (Genesis 1:26; 11:7; Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 6:8).
- b. God's **Spirit** is distinct from God Himself (Isaiah 48:16²; 61:1; 63:10).
- c. Sometimes, the "**angel** of the LORD" appears to be distinct from God and yet he is called "God" or "LORD" at the same time (Genesis 16:13; Exodus 3:2-6; Judges 2:1-2).
- d. The Hebrew term 'Elhohim (אֱלֹהִים), meaning "God" (Psalm 45:6-7) is a **plural** term.
- e. "**Wisdom**" as personified in Proverbs 8:21-31 could be a pre-incarnate description of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God.

2) More Complete Revelation in the New Testament

- a. Several New Testament passages clearly **distinguish** the three persons of the Trinity (Matthew 3:16-17; Matthew 28:19³; Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-6; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, 13:14; Ephesians 1:17; 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2).
- b. These passages demonstrate that each person has a distinct **responsibility** to perform as God carries out His redeeming work in the world.

3) We can categorize the Trinity in two ways:

- a. **Economic Trinity** (How the Persons of the Trinity relate to the world. This refers to the functions that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit carry out). For example, in creation, God the Father spoke the universe into being; God the Son carried out these creative decrees (John 1:3); God the Spirit "hovered" (Genesis 1:2) and manifested God's presence at creation. See also *redemption*.
- b. **Ontological Trinity** (How the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another. This refers to the "being"/"nature" of). The eternal nature of these relationships is where we now turn.

² In an ultimate sense, we can understand the "servant" in Isaiah 48:16 to be Jesus Christ, God's servant. Thus this passage takes on a deeper Trinitarian meaning.

³ Matthew 28:19 clearly establishes that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of equal authority since they are all equally God.

Three Statements Summarize Biblical Teaching on the Trinity

In order to have an orthodox (i.e. “right doctrine/belief”) understanding of God, we must affirm all **three** of these statements:

1) God is Three **Persons**.

- a. This means that the Father is **NOT** the Son; the Son is **NOT** the Spirit, and the Spirit is **NOT** the Father. To propose this is **heresy** (more below).⁴
- b. We merely have to read the New Testament for evidence for these distinctions (*John 1:1-2; 14:26; Romans 8:9*, 27* and so on).

2) Each Person is Fully **God**.

- a. The **Father** is God (*Exodus 4:22; Galatians 4:6-7; Ephesians 4:4-6*).
- b. The **Son/Jesus** is God (*John 1:1-3; 5:18; 8:58* [cf. *Exodus 3:14*]; *20:28*;⁵ *Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:5-8; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1*).
- c. The **Holy Spirit** is God. He is not simply a mysterious “force,” but a very real person and member of the Godhead (*Genesis 1:2; John 14:26; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18*).

3) There is **One God**. (Without this third point, we would be polytheists, more specifically tri-theists).

- a. Scripture is clear that the members of the Godhead/Trinity are one in purpose, but also one in **essence** (or nature).
- b. The **Old Testament** affirms that there is only one God who exists (*Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 1 Kings 8:60; Psalm 45:5-6, 21-22*).
- c. The **New Testament** also affirms that there is only one God who exists (*1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; James 2:19*).

⁴ Note that God the Father did not die on the cross. Jesus, who was God the Son in human flesh, died on the cross.

⁵ Jehovah’s Witnesses argue against the deity of Jesus Christ and against the Trinity through their incorrect understanding of the Greek language of *John 1:1*. They believe that the text reads “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was a God.” This translation indicates that Jesus was a separate “god” and not one in essence with God the Father. This view is heresy.

Definition of the Trinity

“God exists coeternally as three **persons**, each person is fully God, and there is one **God**.”
Put another way: “God exists as three Persons (*hypostases*), one essence (*ousia*).”

All Analogies to Explain the Nature of God Have Shortcomings

While analogies that attempt to explain the Trinity are good intentioned and helpful for an elementary level of understanding, they are ultimately inadequate and misleading.

1) Some of the traditional analogies used to explain the Trinity:

- a. Clover (St. Patrick legend)
- b. Ice cube, water, steam
- c. Egg (Shell, white, yolk)
- d. Tree (roots, trunk, branches)
- e. A man who is a father, son, and husband/brother, etc.
- f. Triple point (temperature and conditions where an element/compound exists as a solid, liquid, and gas all at the same time).
- g. Quarks (fundamental particle of matter??)

2) The Heresy of Modalism (c. A.D 250)

Modalism sees God as one Person who manifests Himself in three distinct “**modes**” at different time. Thus, according to Modalism, God the **Father** suffered and died on the cross.

Sabellianism is a more refined form of Modalism (God: Father in the OT, Son in the gospels and the Spirit in the Book of Acts; see *Jesus only Pentecostals*). Some of the creeds from the early church were responses to these heresies.

Implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity (Implications)

1) Theological Implications of the Trinity

- a) **God is fully self-sufficient**. God does not need us for anything. He genuinely relational and exists independently of us. Still, the amazing thing is that He chose out of an overflow of His love and grace to create us and save us.
- b) **God is able to be completely just and completely merciful at the same time**. In other words, we see how God can embody two seemingly contradictory (yet complimentary) attributes at the same time.

2) Relational Implications

- a) We are made in God's **image** (Genesis 1:27).
- b) We reflect God's **glory** and **rule**.
- c) We have an inherent need for **relationships** (Genesis 2:24; Hebrews 10:24-25). One of the most repeated commandments in the New Testament is "love one another" (John 13:34-35; Romans 13:8; etc.)

3) Prayer Implications

- a) We pray **to** the Father, in the **name** of (or through) the Son, by the **power** of the Holy Spirit. Saying the words "in Jesus' name at the end of our prayers is not necessary to make our prayers efficacious (cf. Matthew 6:9-13).
- b) We must be **very** careful with the language we use.

Key Terms:

Adoptionism
Arianism
Economic Trinity
hypostases
Modalism
Ontological Trinity
ousia
Sabellianism
Trinity
Tritheism

Key Verses:

Deuteronomy 6:4-5
Matthew 3:16-17
Matthew 28:19
Romans 8:11
2 Corinthians 1:21-22
Ephesians 4:4-6
1 Peter 1:2

Scripture Memory:

"Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge." (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NASB).

Homework Assignments #2:

1) Spend some time looking up a few of the Bible verses that support the Trinity. How do these verses help your understanding of God as three Persons and one essence/God? How do they confuse your understanding?

2) Define the "Trinity" for someone you know who is not in this class (family member, co-worker, other TBCers, etc.). Are you able to articulate this concept? Does your listener understand this concept?

3) How does understanding the Trinity influence the way you pray? As you pray this week, incorporate a more fully Trinitarian approach to your prayers. To whom do you pray? Through whom do you pray? By whom do you pray?

4) If someone denies the Trinity, but calls themselves a Christian, are they really a Christian? What if they are simply never taught this theological concept? What if they are taught this concept, but still deny it?

5) Know definitions for Key Terms on page 6.

6) Memorize *2 Corinthians 1:21-22*.

7) Review class notes.

Next Week: Sin!

Topic: THE TRINITY

Key Verses To Consider: Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19

What We Believe:

We believe that:

- God is one God, but that He exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these is fully God: the Father is called God (John 6:27), the Son is called God (Hebrews 1:8), and the Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-4).
- Within the Trinity there is one indivisible essence that belongs equally to each of the three persons and makes them a unity, or Godhead. Though they are three, they are but one God (Deuteronomy 6:4).
- Because God exists in three persons, there can be distinctions within the Trinity. These distinctions are evident in the activities of the Godhead. For example: the Father is especially involved in selecting us (Ephesians 1:3-6); the Son is especially involved in redeeming us (Eph. 1:7-12); the Spirit is especially involved in sealing us (Eph. 1:13-14).
- We acknowledge that the word Trinity is not found in the Bible. However, from the early Church until today, orthodox Christians have used the word to designate the one Being in the universe who is simultaneously single and triple, the one God who is revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So even though the Bible does not use the word, tri-unity or trinity is a fitting and biblical description for the three-in-oneness of God.
- We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit; but the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal . . . so that in all things, both the unity in trinity and the trinity in unity are to be worshiped.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Doctrinal Statement*

Article II — THE TRINITY

We believe that the Godhead eternally exists in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and that these three are one God, having precisely the same nature, attributes, and perfections, and worthy of precisely the same homage, confidence, and obedience (Matt. 28:18–19; Mark 12:29; John 1:14; Acts 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 1:1–3; Rev. 1:4–6).⁶

The Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

AMEN.

⁶ <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>