

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 4: The Doctrine of God – The Doctrine of the Trinity

In this session we will look at the most distinctive Christian concept of God: the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is unique to Christianity that you will not find in any other religion and is the basis for how we understand the very essence of God and how we relate to God and understand the persons and functions of the Godhead. This doctrine is what truly sets Christianity apart from all other religions and is often the first issue that other religions will attack when trying to discredit the Christian faith.

In lesson one, we learned that monotheism is the basis for our belief in God. We do not hold to a polytheistic view as did the pagan nations in the Ancient Near East, we do not hold to a monolatrist view of God as early Judaism did, we hold to the monotheistic view that Judaism came to understand but differ in the fact that our monotheistic faith is described as ‘trinitarian.’

Important Terms

Trinity: The Christian doctrine that God exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—while being one God in essence.

Trinitarian: A term that is commonly used to describe Christian denominations, theological writings, prayers, hymns, and other aspects of faith that adhere to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Essence (Ousia): The fundamental nature or substance of God. In the context of the Trinity, it refers to what God is in His being—fully and equally shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Person (Hypostasis): A distinct center of consciousness or self-awareness within the Godhead, possessing individuality and personal attributes. In Trinitarian theology, there are three persons in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Co-equality: The doctrine that each person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is equally and fully God, possessing the same divine attributes, authority, and power.

Co-eternality: The belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed eternally and without beginning, with no one person preceding the others in time. They share the same divine nature and exist in an eternal relationship of love and fellowship.

Consubstantiality: Denotes the unity of substance or essence shared by the three persons of the Trinity. It affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same substance or essence, emphasizing their equality and unity.

Incarnation: The Christian belief that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, became human in the person of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is central to understanding how God reconciles humanity to Himself through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Hypostatic Union: refers to the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the person of Jesus Christ. According to this doctrine, Jesus is both fully God and fully man simultaneously.

Defining the Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that there is **ONE GOD who ETERNALLY EXISTS in THREE DISTINCT CO-EQUAL PERSONS:** God The **Father**, God The **Son**, and God the **Holy Spirit**. These three persons are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial (of the same substance).

The Trinity is can be explained as: God is **ONE IN ESSENCE**, but **THREE IN PERSONS** or to put it in other words: God is **ONE ‘WHAT’** and **THREE ‘WHOS’**.

What the Trinity is not:

- The Trinity is not the belief that there three different gods.
- The Trinity is not the belief that there three different gods in one God.
- The Trinity is not the belief that God manifests himself in three different ways or modes.
- The trinity is not the belief that the Godhead is in anyway subordinate to one another.

It is the belief that One God exists in Three Distinct Persons who are distinct in personhood but one in essence.

IN PERSONHOOD:

The Father is not the Son

The Son is not the Spirit

The Spirit is not the Father

IN ESSENSE:

What is true of the Father is true of the Son

What is true of the Son is true of the Spirit

What is true of the Spirit is true of the Father

The History of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Early Christian Beliefs

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity within the early Church was a complex process that evolved over several centuries and was shaped by various theological, philosophical, and historical factors. Which had its origins in debates over the divinity of Christ. Here's an overview of how the doctrine came into being:

New Testament Origins:

- The seeds of Trinitarian doctrine can be found in the New Testament, where there are indications of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being distinct yet united in the divine identity.
- While the New Testament does not explicitly articulate the doctrine of the Trinity in systematic terms, it contains passages that suggest a plurality of persons within the Godhead.

Early Christian Reflection:

- In the post-apostolic era, early Christians grappled with how to understand and articulate the relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
- Various theological concepts emerged, such as the Logos (Word) of God, which was seen as pre-existing with God and instrumental in creation (John 1:1-3)
- Early Christian thinkers like Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, and Irenaeus emphasized the divinity of Christ and his role in salvation, laying the groundwork for later Trinitarian developments.

Theological Controversies:

- The doctrine of the Trinity was further shaped by theological controversies and debates within the early Church.
- The Arian controversy in the 4th century, centered around the teachings of Arius, challenged the orthodox understanding of Christ's divinity. This led to the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which affirmed the Nicene Creed and declared the Son to be "of the same substance" (homoousios) as the Father, effectively rejecting Arianism.
- Subsequent debates focused on the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, particularly regarding their unity and distinction of persons.

Ecumenical Councils and Formulation of Creeds:

- Ecumenical councils, such as Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD), played a crucial role in clarifying and formalizing the doctrine of the Trinity.
- These councils produced statements of faith, such as the Nicene Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which articulated the Church's belief in the Trinity and affirmed the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The History of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Heresies & Other Beliefs Concerning the Trinity

Throughout the early centuries of Christianity, various beliefs and heresies concerning the Trinity emerged, leading to theological debates and controversies.

Ancient Heresies

- **Modalism:** Modalism taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons within the Godhead but different modes or manifestations of the same divine being. According to modalism, God revealed Himself sequentially as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Holy Spirit in sanctification. This view was condemned as heretical because it denied the distinctiveness of the persons of the Trinity and failed to account for their simultaneous existence.
- **Arianism:** Arianism, named after the presbyter Arius, denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ and asserted that the Son was a created being, distinct from the eternal God the Father. Arius taught that there was a time when the Son did not exist and that He was the first and greatest of God's creations. Arianism was condemned as heresy at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which affirmed the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.
- **Subordinationism:** Subordinationism taught that while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all divine, they are not equal in status or power. This belief asserted that the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in essence or authority.

Modern Unorthodox Beliefs

- **Oneness Pentecostalism:** Oneness Pentecostalism, also known as Jesus' Name theology or modalistic theology, rejects the traditional Trinitarian doctrine. It teaches that there is only one person in the Godhead who has manifested Himself in three different modes or roles.
- **Unitarianism:** Unitarianism denies the Trinity and asserts the strict monotheistic belief in one God. Unitarians typically reject the divinity of Jesus Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit, considering them as either human prophets or symbols of divine attributes.
- **Jehovah's Witnesses:** Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus Christ is a created being, the first and highest creation of Jehovah God. They teach that Jesus is not co-eternal with the Father and is subordinate to God. They refer to Jesus as the "Son of God" but deny his full deity, viewing him as a divine being but not equal to God. They interpret the Holy Spirit as God's active force or power at work in the world.
- **Mormonism:** Mormons believe that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct beings with individual bodies, consciousness, and roles. They reject the traditional Trinitarian view of God as one in substance or essence, instead affirming a form of divine plurality. In Mormon theology, Jesus Christ holds a central role as the Savior and Redeemer, but He is seen as subordinate to God the Father in authority and divine status.

The Biblical Case for the Trinity

The reason the doctrine of the Trinity was such a debated topic was because, contrary to what many Christians may think, the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly taught and expounded upon in the Bible. In fact, the word 'trinity' is nowhere to be found in the Bible, and critics of the doctrine love to point this out. The fact is, we cannot go to any one passage of the Bible and come away with a full Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. While the scriptures affirm the deity of all three persons of the Godhead, it only alludes to the working and nature of their relationship. We have no explicit, systematic teaching or explanation of the Trinity in Scripture. This does not mean however, that the framework and concept of the Trinity is not taught, thus, the early church spent a lot of time 'putting the pieces together' and trying to come up with language that would best describe what they saw in scripture.

The closest verse that we have that Christians have used as a proof-text of the Trinity is 1 John 5:7-8 in the King James Bible which reads: *"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one."*

Proponents of this verse would argue that it provides explicit biblical support for the Trinitarian formula. However, there are obvious problems with this verse. This verse has been a subject of much debate among biblical scholars and theologians due to its absence in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament. Many modern translations omit this passage or include it with a footnote explaining its textual history. As such, scholars typically approach this passage with caution and prefer to draw upon other biblical passages and theological considerations to articulate the Trinitarian nature of God.

So what foundation in Scripture led to the doctrine of the Trinity?

The Father as God

- John 6:27 "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him **God the Father** has set his seal."
- 1 Corinthians 8:6 "yet for us there is **one God, the Father**, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."
- Ephesians 4:6 "**one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all."
- 1 Peter 1:2 "according to the **foreknowledge of God the Father**..."

The Son as God

- John 20:28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "**My Lord and my God!**"
- 2 Peter 1:1 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness **of our God and Savior Jesus Christ**:
- Titus 2:13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of **our great God and Savior Jesus Christ**,
- John 17:5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had **with you before the world existed**.
- John 10:30 I and the Father **are one**

- John 14:9 Anyone who has seen me **has seen the Father**
- John 1:1–3 In the beginning was the Word, and the **Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

This “Word” is Jesus

- John 1:14 And the **Word became flesh** and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Holy Spirit as God

- Acts 5:3–4 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie to the Holy Spirit** and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?... You have **not lied to man but to God**.”
- The Holy Spirit is seen in various scriptures to have personal attributes, attributing personhood to Him

The Trinity Together

- Matthew 3:16–17 And when **Jesus** was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the **Spirit of God** descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, **a voice from heaven** said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”
- 1 Peter 1:2 according to the **foreknowledge of God the Father**, in the **sanctification of the Spirit**, for **obedience to Jesus Christ...**
- Matthew 28:19 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**,
- Genesis 1:1-3 In the beginning **God created** the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the **Spirit of God** was hovering over the waters. **And God said**, “Let there be light,” and there was light

Final Questions on the Trinity

Here are a few quick questions that always come up when discussing the Trinity:

Q. If it’s such an important doctrine then why isn’t the word ‘Trinity’ found in the Bible?

A. The word may not be found in the Bible but the concept is.

Q. If Jesus is God, then how can he be God’s Son?

A. Because of the nature of the Trinity. God = Essence, Son = Personhood

Q. If Jesus is God and the Father is God, then when Jesus prayed to the Father, wasn’t he praying to himself?

A. No. The Son was praying to the Father. Three persons means that there is a relationship within the Godhead that is distinct.

Q. If Jesus is co-equal with the Father how could he say “my Father is greater than I” (Jn. 14:28)?

A. Jesus isn’t saying ‘I’m less than God’, it’s person specific as far as his earthly ministry and submitting to the Father’s will. Plus it was only temporary (Jn. 17:5 ‘the glory I had with You before the world was’

Q. If Jesus was God, then why didn’t he just come out and say it?

A. He affirmed his deity, but was careful to distinguish His personhood from the Father