

The Godhead (Trinity) Explained

The believer will not attain salvation if the Trinity is not complete
– Origen, 2nd century

Just about everything that matters in Christianity hangs on the truth of God's three-in-oneness.
– Bruce Milne, 20th century

Teaching Outline – Week 3

Teacher: Matt Erickson

I. Introduction

- A. A. W. Tozer: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (*The Knowledge of the Holy* 1)
- B. God is mysterious but not irrational
 - 1. Mysterious: Revealed but beyond us; we are finite but he is infinite
 - 2. Not irrational: The Trinity is not incoherent or stupid, but a recognition that we stand unable to entirely know God
- C. God is knowable but not comprehensible
 - 1. Knowable: The Trinity reminds us that God reveals Himself to us in personal and relational ways
 - 2. Not comprehensible: He is knowable but not capture-able ; there is no way that we can entirely comprehend all of God; Augustine says: "If you understand Him, He is not God."
- D. Alistair McGrath: "The doctrine of the Trinity gathers together the richness of the complex Christian understanding of God; it yields a vision of God to which the only appropriate response is adoration and devotion." (*God the Holy Trinity* 22)

II. Biblical Outline

A. The Oneness of God

1. OT

- a. **Exodus 20:2-3** – "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other Gods before me."
- b. **Deuteronomy 6:4** – "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one."
- c. **Isaiah 45:22** – "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other."

2. NT

- a. **1 Corinthians 8:4, 6** – "So, then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There is no God but one.' . . . for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and through whom we live."
- b. **Ephesians 4:4-5** – "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one

faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

B. Deity of 3 Persons

1. God the Father

- a. **Genesis 1:1** – “In beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”
- b. **Matthew 6:9** – “This then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name . . .’”
- c. **Matthew 27:46** – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- d. **Ephesians 4:4-5** – “There is . . . one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

2. God the Son

- a. **John 10:29-30** – “My father, who has given them to me, is greater than all . . . I and the Father are one.”
- b. **John 5:18** – “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”
- c. **Philippians 2:5-11** – “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:

Who, being in very nature God,

Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped;

Rather, he made himself nothing

By taking the very nature of a servant,

Being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human being,

He humbled himself

By becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

And gave him the name that is above every name,

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

In heaven and on earth and under the earth,

And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

To the glory of God the Father.

- d. **Hebrews 1:2-4** – “but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”

3. God the Holy Spirit

- a. **John 15:26** – “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me.”
- b. **1 Corinthians 2:10-11** – “For God has revealed them [these things God has prepared for those who love him] to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who

knows a person's thoughts except that person's own spirit within?
In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

- c. **1 Corinthians 12:4-11** – "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom . . . All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines."

C. Three-in-Oneness of God

1. OT

- a. **Genesis 1:1-3, 26** – "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 [word] . . . Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness'"
- b. **Genesis 11:7** – "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."
- c. **Genesis 18:1-2** – "The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground."

2. NT

- a. **Matthew 3:13-17** – "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"
- b. **Matthew 28:19** – "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
- c. **John 15:26** – "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me."
- d. **1 Corinthians 12:4-6** – "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work."
- e. **2 Corinthians 13:14** – "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."
- f. **Galatians 4:6** – "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"
- g. **1 Peter 1:2** – "[you] have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of

the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood”

- III. Historical Outline (see additional handout)
 - A. Tertullian's coining of the term
 - 1. First Latin theologian in 150-225 AD.
 - 2. Wording:
 - a. *Trinitas* – Trinity
 - b. *Persona* (lit. 'a mask') – persons, but really God acting in a multiplicity of manners in how he has ordered the salvation of humanity in history (McGrath 295-6).
 - c. *Substantia* – substance; what they have in common; "their common foundational unity, despite their outward appearance of diversity" (McGrath 295).
 - B. Council of Nicaea (325)
 - 1. Arian-Athanasian controversy over the nature of the Son
 - a. Arius – Jesus created being; divine, but not the same as God
 - b. Athanasius – Son is co-equal, co-eternal, and of co-essence with the Father
 - c. First declaration against Arianism and modalism
 - d. First declaration for Trinitarianism

- IV. Overview
 - A. One God, 3 persons with different functions
 - B. All persons in Godhead involved in all God does – John 3:16-18
 - C. No hierarchy – Mark 14:62; Revelation 4:11; Revelation 22:11
 - D. Analogies
 - 1. Apple
 - 2. Egg – yolk, white, shell
 - 3. Water – solid, liquid, gas/vapor
 - 4. Augustine: God is love/lover; Jesus is the object of divine love of the Father and the Holy Spirit is the love binding them together

- V. False teachings (Heresies)
 - A. Subordinationism – Gives up Jesus' divinity, making him lower than the Father (Arianism)
 - B. Modalism – God appearing in different modes/persons at different times; concern over maintaining the unity of God; Sabellius – God is a monad, which expressed itself in three operations; God is like the sun, the Son and the Spirit his emanations of light and heat
 - C. Tritheism – 3 different Gods that are co-equal and co-existent; concern over maintaining the distinctiveness of each person of the Trinity; loses the unity of God

- VI. Implications:
 - A. God's action in Jesus demands a Trinitarian view of God for salvation to be possible
 - B. God's relational life is a model for Christian community
 - C. Alistair McGrath: "The doctrine of the Trinity gathers together the richness of the complex Christian understanding of God; it yields a vision of God to which the only appropriate response is adoration and devotion" (*God the Holy Trinity* 22).

Resources on the Trinity:

Tim Chester. *Delighting in the Trinity*. Kregel Publications, 2005.

Walter Elwell, ed. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001.

Millard Erickson. *Making Sense of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

Kevin N. Giles. *The Trinity and Subordinationism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

_____. *The Father and Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Alister McGrath. *Understanding the Trinity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990.

Bruce Milne. *Know the Truth*, revised edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.