

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 5

The Trinitarian Nature of God: What is God Like?

Objective: To understand God's trinitarian nature, to see its importance to the Christian faith and life, and to delight in the Triune God.

I. Review

II. The Importance of Trinitarianism

"The doctrine of the Trinity shapes and structures Christian faith and practice in every way, distinguishing it from all world religions. From the Enlightenment to the present day, it has been widely assumed that we all worship the same God with different names; every religion brings its piece of the puzzle to the game. Despite its cheery optimism, this is actually a disrespectful position to take, not only toward Christianity but toward other religions... We do not disagree merely over words or the finer points of theology, but over the identity of the object of our worship and the only name on whom we are to call for salvation."

– Michael Horton (1964-Present), *Pilgrim Theology*, 89

"It is only when you grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God... What we assume would be a dull or peculiar irrelevance turns out to be the source of all that is good in Christianity. Neither a problem nor a technicality, the triune being of God is the vital oxygen of Christian life and joy." – Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 18

"In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable." – Augustine (354-430), *On the Trinity*

III. The Way We Get Doctrine

Drama --> Doctrine --> Doxology --> Discipleship

A. The Trinity Begins with Doxology:

"Christians praise one God in three persons, the blessed Trinity. We do so by proclaiming God's triune name in baptism (Matt. 28:19), by invoking his name in benedictions (2 Cor. 13:14), by binding ourselves to his name when confessing our faith (1 Cor. 8:6; 12:3), and by hymning his name in our songs, joining the chorus of heavenly beings with all the saints in heaven and on earth (Rev. 4-5)." – Scott Swain (1972-Present), *The Trinity: An Introduction*, 15

- B. Earliest and most basic confession of the church: “Jesus is Lord”** (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11; cf. John 20:28; Acts 2:36; 10:36; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 4:5)¹

Romans 10:9, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

1 Corinthians 12:3, Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

- C. The very first action of the Christian life is Christian baptism in the triune name:**

Matthew 28:18-20, And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- D. But the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had always taught a militant monotheism:**

Isaiah 45:5-6, I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Isaiah 42:8, I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.

Exodus 20:2-3, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

- E. Do we still believe in one God? Or are there two Gods?**

The New Testament wholeheartedly confirms that Christians also believe there is one God (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 3:20; Rom. 3:30).

¹ This seems to be synonymous with claims that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ and that he is God/the Son of God (Mt. 1:1; 14:33; 16:16; 27:54; Jn. 1:49; 11:27; 20:28, 31; Mk. 1:1; 15:39; Lk. 1:35; Acts 5:42; 9:20; 17:3; Rom. 1:4; 1 Jn. 4:15)

John 1:1-2, 14, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

F. So, how are we to conceive of and speak about our God?

Who is the God we worship?

Who is the God we confess?

Who is the God by whom we are saved and with whom we have fellowship?

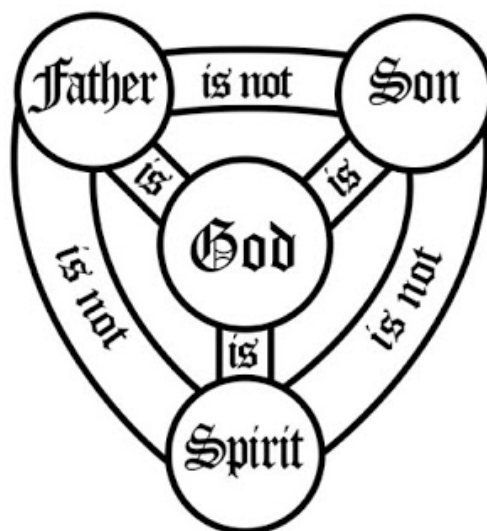
To whom do we cry out in prayer and praise in song?

What is the name that we wear as a “Christian”?

IV. The Basics of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Seven Statements²

1. There is only one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6-8; 45:5,18,22; 46:9; 1 Tim. 2:5; Gal. 3:20; Rom. 3:30; Jas. 2:19)
2. The Father is God (Eph. 4:6; 1 Cor. 8:6)
3. The Son is God (Matt. 14:33; 16:16; Mk. 1:1; Lk. 1:32,35; Jn. 1:1; 5:18; 20:21)
4. The Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3,4)
5. The Father is not the Son (Jn. 1:1; 17:1-5; Mt. 3:16-17)
6. The Son is not the Spirit (Jn. 14:15-17; 16:7; Acts 2:33; Mt. 3:16-17)
7. The Spirit is not the Father (Jn. 14:15-17; Acts 2:33; Mt. 3:16-17)



² Taken from Kevin DeYoung in *The New City Catechism Devotional*, 26.

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 8. *Are there more Gods than one?*

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

Q. 9. *How many persons are there in the Godhead?*

A. There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.

Athanasian Creed (c. 500 A.D.)

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith: that we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confounding their persons nor dividing the essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another,
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.

But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, the glory equal,
the majesty coeternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Spirit.

The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is
immeasurable.

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being.

So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but
one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is
almighty.

Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being.

Thus, the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God.

Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.

Thus, the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord.

Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person
individually as both God and Lord,

so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.

V. Trinitarian Heresies

How can we conceive of the fact that there is but one true God, and yet God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Tritheism—The Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three independent divine beings; three separate gods who share the 'same substance'.

This says that there is a species or genus of “God” (just like there is a species or genus of human or dog), and that there are three beings within that species—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This directly contradicts Scripture (which continually asserts monotheism).

Partialism—The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. Therefore, each of the persons of the Trinity is only partially God, only becoming fully God when they come together.

This typically suggests that each person represents a different “aspect” or “side” of God. This contradicts our conception of God as simple (not made up of parts).

Modalism—The three persons of the Trinity as different “modes” of the Godhead. Adherents believed that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not distinct personalities, but different modes of God's self-revelation.

A typical modalist approach is to regard God as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Spirit in sanctification. In other words, God exists as Father, Son and Spirit in different eras, but never as Triune. Taught most famously by Sabellius, a third century Roman presbyter. A later version of this teaching was called Patripassianism, because it taught that the Father (Latin, *pater*) suffered (Latin, *passio*) on the cross.

Subordinationism—The Father is most fully God and the Son and the Spirit are ontologically inferior (i.e., subordinate). In other words, they are not equal in power and glory.

This was taught by the early church presbyter Arius (c. 250-336), who taught that the Son was the first created being and not eternal. The jingle that made his teaching popular was, “There was a time when the Son was not.” This controversy led to the first council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), where Arian teaching was contradicted by teaching that the Son was eternally begotten and “of the same substance as the Father.”

VI. Why Does This Matter?

A. Worship

God says again and again in the Old Testament that it is sinful (in fact, the chief sin) to worship anyone other than Him, or to attribute to anyone else what only he has done and can do. (Is. 42:8; 45:5-6; Ex. 20:2-3; 32:4)

If we are worshipping Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and they are not truly God (or if we are giving them *equal* praise and glory, when they are lesser gods), then we are committing idolatry.

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen, Amen.” – *Gloria Patri* (4th century)

B. The Atonement

One reason Jesus had to be fully God was that he needed to be able to take the full wrath of God for us. His full divinity was necessary to sustain his humanity as he took the punishment for our sins.

Heidelberg Catechism Q. 17. *Why must he (the mediator) also be true God?*

A. So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear in his humanity the weight of God’s wrath, and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

C. Revelation

Scripture makes amazing statements about Jesus revealing the Father to us.

John 1:1-2, 14, 18 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

John 14:8-9, Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

Matthew 11:25-27, At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Colossians 1:15, 19, He is the image of the invisible God... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Hebrews 1:1-3, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

If Jesus is not truly God (or is a lesser god), then he cannot accurately reveal the Father to us in the way he claims.

D. Indwelling

When Jesus's disciples are sad and afraid that he is going away, he promises that he himself will not leave them as orphans, but will come to them (Jn. 14:1-4, 16-18). Jesus makes clear that the one who will come to them is the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:25-26). Jesus cannot possibly say that *he* will come to them if he is not truly one with the Holy Spirit (similarly, Col. 1:27). We also cannot believe the promises of God in Scripture that God dwells in us if the Holy Spirit is a lesser god (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16).

VII. Application for Reading Scripture

Each person of the Trinity is fully God, which means that all of the attributes described in Class 3 (simplicity, aseity, immutability, impassibility, eternity, omnipresence, sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, love, truth, justice, mercy, etc.) are true of *all three persons* of the Godhead. The Son is not the loving and merciful one and the Father the just and powerful one. The Spirit is not the all-wise and the Father all-powerful. It's not that the Father is immutable but the Son and Spirit are subject to change. Each person is *truly* God.

Since many of the great statements of our doctrine of God are in the Old Testament. It is important that we banish the idea that the God of the Old Testament is the Father, and the Son and Spirit show up in the New Testament. *The God of the Old Testament is the Triune God*. So, these statements are statements about the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Psalms 115:3, Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Exodus 34:5-8, The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

Isaiah 46:8-11, Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'
calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

VIII. How do the three persons relate to one another?

A. Trinitarian Terminology

Immanent Trinity – The hidden trinitarian communion (sometimes you will hear this referred to as the ontological Trinity)

Economic Trinity – The revealed activity of the triune God in creation, redemption, and consummation

Ad Intra – Who God is *in himself*

Ad Extra – God's actions *outside of himself*

The point of this distinction is similar to the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology (knowing God as he knows himself verses knowing God in the way he has revealed himself to his finite creatures). We only have the knowledge of God that he has given us, and God has revealed precious little about who he is *in himself* (*ad intra*). So, one caution we need to take is that we don't take things that God has revealed to us about the shape of his work in the world (*ad extra*) and project that back onto who he is in himself (*ad intra*) unless he has given us reason to do that through his revelation.

B. Personal Properties

Q. 10. *What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead?*

A. It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.

The way the Scriptures distinguish between the three persons of the Trinity *ad intra* is not by chronological order (the Father came first, then the Son, then the Spirit), or by power or glory (the Son and Spirit somehow being lesser beings than the Father). The way the Bible distinguishes between the persons is by their **relations of origin**.

“There is nothing that the Father is that the Son and the Spirit are not, except for being the Father. There is nothing that the Son is that the Father and Spirit are not, except for being the Son. And there is nothing that the Spirit is that the Father and the Son are not, except for being the Spirit... That is to say, each divine person is equally and identically the one true and living God; the only real distinctions between the persons are their relations to each other.” – Scott Swain, 60-61

Back to the Athanasian Creed

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone.

The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone.

The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly, there is one Father, not three fathers;

there is one Son, not three sons;

there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

None in this Trinity is before or after, none is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier, the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, is to be worshiped.

Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.

“The person of the Father eternally communicates his simple essence to the person of the Son in eternal generation [i.e., begetting]. In similar fashion, just as the Father and the Son have life in themselves, so they have granted the Spirit to have life in himself. The persons of the Father and the Son eternally communicate their simple essence to the Spirit in eternal spiration.” – Swain, 62

C. The Trinitarian Shape of God’s Works

The actions that God does in the world (God’s works) can be summarized in the works of creation, redemption, and consummation. And these external works of God have a Trinitarian Shape, proceeding from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. However, before we get there, more grammar.

All God's external works are the indivisible works of the one God. God does not take a "divide and conquer" approach to the works of creation, redemption, and consummation. Rather than "dividing up the work" theologians speak of "appropriations" of God's work. The Father initiates God's indivisible works, the Son accomplishes them, and the Holy Spirit brings those works to their crowning effects.

This can be seen in the work of creation, where the Father creates by means of his word (the Son), and then the Spirit hovers over the face of the waters and brings order to chaos. In the work of redemption, the Father sends the Son to accomplish the work (in the power of the Holy Spirit and in constant fellowship with his Father), and the Spirit brings the accomplishment of that work to fruition by applying it to believers. In the work of consummation, the Father initiates the end of the present evil age and the beginning of the age to come, the Son executes his judgment and is wedded to his bride, and the Spirit completes his work of sanctification in believers by glorifying them in joy and perfection.

And while all the works of the Triune God are indivisible, we must also recognize that Scripture specially identifies the persons with those works in different ways. So, the Father is specially identified with the work of creation (Eph. 3:9; Jms. 1:17; Rev. 4:11). The Son is specially identified with the work of redemption (2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 5:9-10), and the Spirit is specially identified with the work of sanctification (1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13).

D. Another (Modern) Error

Eternal Functional Subordinationism—This teaches that what distinguishes the members of the Trinity is not an ontological hierarchy, but a functional hierarchy or a hierarchy of wills. So, the Son and Spirit eternally submit to the Father's will.

While there is certainly order in the Trinity ("the Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone") the Church has never confessed hierarchy of any kind. Additionally, one of the things that belongs to the essence of the Trinity is the divine will. There is one will in God, not three wills.³ And so to create a hierarchy of wills is also to change our doctrine of the divine essence.

"The reason for attending to the Bible's Trinitarian discourse, and for discipling our minds and lips before the radiance of God's simple light, is not to explain God's triune life but to stand in awe of it, to adore it, and to embrace it as it unfolds itself in Scripture." – Scott Swain, 63

³ Next week we will talk about different senses of that one divine will (i.e., hidden will and revealed will), but the different senses are not distinguished by the persons of the Trinity.

IX. Communion & Doxology

John 17:20-26, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (see also 1 Jn. 1:1-4; 2:24)

Revelation 4:8-11; 5:8-14,

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea,
and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Discussion Questions

- **Inward Application:** How does the doctrine of the Trinity affect your prayer life?
- **Outward Application:** The Trinity is often shied away from in evangelism. How does today’s class give you reason to include the Trinity in evangelism?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** Read the “Application for Reading Scripture” section above again. How does the doctrine of the Trinity help you read the Old Testament as a Christian?
- **Reading Scripture:** John 16:1-15