

King's Online Bible School
Doctrine 101: Learning about God

Trinity (adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Bible Doctrines*)

Definition: God eternally exists as three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each Person is fully God, and there is one God.

1. The biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity

The word "Trinity" is never found in the Bible, but God's revelation about Himself (which this word is describing) becomes very clear in Scripture. "Trinity" is a briefer form of "Tri-unity," a name that recognizes God's revelation of Himself as Three in One.

a. There is a partial revelation in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament makes us aware from the very beginning that there is a plurality of Persons in God Himself but that, at the same time, He is referred to in the singular as One.

On the sixth day of creation God says, "Let Us make man in Our image" (Gen 1:26). But then the account immediately returns to using the third person singular pronoun in referring to God. "And God created man in His Own image" (1:27).

Then, in another instance when we are being told what God is thinking and intending (in Gen 3:22), He says, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us."

When Isaiah receives his vision and call, he reports: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send. And who will go for Us?'" (Isaiah 6:8) Here we see that God refers to Himself as "I" and "Us" in the same statement.

David shows that he is aware of this plurality and also of one of the distinctions within this plurality in the opening words of Psalm 110:1:

The Lord said to my Lord:
Sit at My right hand,
Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.

Jesus quotes these words in challenging the Jewish leaders to consider Who He actually is (Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44).

There is no explicit statement in the Old Testament that God is three Persons, but we do know that God is a plurality at the same time He is One (Deut 6:4).

b. Clearer, fuller revelation comes in the New Testament.

It quickly becomes clear that the plurality in God is in three Persons. Already at Jesus' baptism we meet the three Persons in a very distinctive way.

And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased" (Matt 3:16-17).

The three Persons are all mentioned in the same context. Jesus, God's Son is standing there near the water. The Spirit of God is descending in visible form, coming to Jesus. It is clear that the Spirit is not identified with Jesus as the same person. Also, the Spirit is there upon Jesus, while the voice of the Father is heard from heaven.

The blessings with which the apostles closed their letters frequently reflect how clearly they understood God in this way. For example, Paul ends 2 Corinthians with these words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (13:14).

Peter refers to the three Persons working together with distinction in harmony as One in his opening greeting in 1 Peter 1:1-2: "To those . . . who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood."

2. A summary of the biblical teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity

While the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that we will never fully understand, the Bible teaches certain truths which are all true, and which must all be maintained, even though there seems to be paradox (but not contradiction) as they are compared. The Bible is categorically clear that:

God is three Persons.
Each Person is fully God.
There is one God.

We cannot explain how these three statements can fit together, but if we do away with or weaken any one of them we are not remaining consistent with the truth that the Bible clearly teaches.

As we look briefly at the biblical data supporting each assertion, we will note some of the unacceptable implications that would follow if these truths are not affirmed. The realities of our faith depend on these truths about God being Triune.

a. God is three Persons.

If God is three Persons, then the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each distinct Persons. So, for example, the Father is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Son. Note some of the passages that teach the distinction between persons:

i. The distinction between Father and Son:

"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1)

Clearly, John writes about two Persons here. The Father is the One Who receives the Advocacy the Son presents on our behalf.

The writer to the Hebrews points to the same provision God has made for us: "He (Jesus) is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). The one Person makes intercession to the other on our behalf.

ii. The distinction between Father and Spirit:

Jesus tells His disciples, "'But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26).

The One sending and the One sent are two different Persons. Jesus' words here also make it clear that the Holy Spirit is a different Person than Jesus.

iii. The distinction between Son and Spirit:

Jesus makes this distinction even more obvious as He goes on preparing His disciples for the time when He will no longer be with them: "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7).

If there is not plurality, there could have been no interpersonal relationships prior to creation. Then relationships would have only become a reality within the created order. As a result it is hard to see how God could be considered self-sufficient, because it would imply that He would have needed to have creation in order to actually be a Being Who relates. If an aspect of Whom God is is relational, then He would have needed to have relationship within Himself eternally.

God revealed His awareness of how important relationships are for persons when He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18). This makes it all the more evident that, because God is personal, there would always have been a relational aspect to His Being.

b. Each Person is fully God.

i. The Father is fully God.

Whenever we speak of God the Father, there is nothing to make us question that we are speaking of God. We frequently address the Father simply as "God." He is the One of Whom Jesus spoke as "the Father in Heaven." When Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," the Jews intended to stone Him because, as they said, "You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God" (John 10:30-33).

ii. The Son is fully God.

"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" (John 1:1, 14).

This is in opposition to the Jehovah's Witnesses who say that the Word was "a god" rather than God Himself.

If Jesus was merely a created being:

- He would not be great enough to save us. Only God can provide a salvation that embraces all humanity and that reconciles everything in heaven and on earth (Col 1:19-20).
- He would not be worthy of the worship we are commanded to give Him.

iii. The Holy Spirit is fully God.

When Peter confronts Ananias he asks him "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" Then, as he continues, he adds, "You have not lied to men, but to God" (Acts 5:3-4).

When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus He tells him that a man must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5-7). When John discusses about this new birth in his epistle, he writes about being "born of God" (1 John 3:9).

c. There is One God.

Scripture is abundantly clear that there is only one God. God makes this truth about Himself a centerpiece of Israel's testimony: "Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God. Yahweh is One" And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart" (Deut 6:4-5; see also Isa 45:5-6). The

insistence that God is One is just as strongly confirmed in the New Testament. In writing about the truth by which men are saved, Paul speaks of Jesus as the Mediator, but begins with the affirmation, "There is one God" (1 Tim 2:5).

So the Persons of the Trinity are not merely three Persons who get along well and who are one in purpose and agreement. They are one in essence; God is only one Being. There are not three Gods.

If there is not perfect unity in God Himself, then we do not have a secure basis for expecting a complete harmony and unity among the diverse elements of the universe. Just reflecting on the idea of more than one God brings an immediate sense of insecurity.

3. Trying to understand the biblical teaching on the Trinity

Throughout Christian history there have been many attempts to find some analogy that demonstrates the Trinity and that recognizes the same kind of relationship in the natural world. While there are some similarities that can be noticed, none of them is able to provide a perfect analogy to the mystery of the Three in One.

One such attempt is to refer to the way water can be liquid, steam, or solid ice. But the analogy does not work because no portion of water can be all three at the same time. No attempt at finding an analogy manages to match this wonder about God.

If somebody denies any of the above three statements about the Father, Son, and Spirit, what they are proposing is not true to the teaching of Scripture. None of those who have attempted to resolve the mystery have been able to do so. Their explanations have always resulted in weakening or denying one of the three statements.

Modalism claims that there is one Person who appears to us in three different forms: sometimes as Father, other times as Son, or Spirit. But this denies that God is three Persons and leaves no room for relationship between the Persons. It completely fails to account for the biblical revelation of the three Persons each being active in different ways at the same time (e.g., at Jesus' baptism [Matt 3:16-17]).

Arianism claims that there is one God, but by denying that the Son is truly God. Arius saw the Son as "similar to the Father", but not of one essence with the Father, believing Him to have been created by God before any other creature. Arius taught that the Son was created by God as the One through Whom all other creation came into being. He acknowledged Him as the greatest created being, but a created being, nonetheless. The Son was only "god" in the lesser sense that He was made like God.

Tritheism affirms the distinctiveness of the three Persons, but claims that this asserts the reality of three Gods.

Any human effort to succinctly explain the Trinity inevitably ends up in heresy at one end of the spectrum or the other.

4. What assertions can we make about the distinctions between the Persons, without compromising the Unity of Being?

If we say that each member of the Trinity is fully God and personally shares in all the attributes of God, then what are the distinctions among the Persons?

a. Each Person has different primary functions in relating to the world:

In creation, the Father spoke the creative words. The Son carried out the creative decrees; He is the Word going forth. All things came into being through Him (John 1:3). The Spirit is presented as moving over the surface of the waters, bringing God's life (breath) into creation (Gen 1:2).

In redemption (the new creation), the Father purposed salvation in counsel with the Son and the Spirit. But the Father is the One Who is presented as purposing and sending. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). He sent His Son.

The Son obeyed and accomplished redemption for us. The Son comes into the world acknowledging, "A body you have prepared for Me; . . . Behold, I have come . . . to do Your will, O God" (Heb 10:5-7). The Father commands. The Son obeys.

The Father provides and prepares the body which the Son receives. The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary, overshadowing her with the power of the Most High and the Son is conceived (Luke 1:35).

Once Jesus' redeeming work is complete and He has ascended to the Father, He sends the Holy Spirit, Who comes, imparting the Son's life and authority to men. Men must be born of the Spirit (John 3:5-8). When the believers pray to the Lord to enable them to speak the Word with confidence and to do signs and wonders "through the name of Thy Holy Servant Jesus," they are filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:24-31).

b. While there is equality in being, there is subordination in roles.

This was not a matter of administrative convenience to allocate different roles in creation and redemption. Eternally and essentially the Father in His very nature is the One Who initiates, commands, and sends. The Son by His very nature is the One Who obeys. He is the One Who radiates the glory and reveals the Father. He is the Word sent out, the One Who expresses the heart of the Father. The Father is the One from Whom He comes. The Spirit is eternally preoccupied in seeking to glorify the Son. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, imparting truth and life. He joins Himself to the spirit of each believer.

Each is fully God, but the differences are in relationship (to one another and to creation).

In the Trinity we see a model of what community is all about. One of the reasons God created men was so that they could be incorporated into the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus' great high-priestly prayer the night before He died expressed the desire that those who were His would be with Him in the glory He has with the Father from before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). He asked "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us" (John 17:21).

Jesus' words help us see that when God created us in His image, He put in us an inherent commitment to community. This is who we are and are becoming. We are created and recreated to be in relation to God and to one another. This is realized first of all in the context of the church, where our unity is a witness to the Trinity.

And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me (John 17:22-23).

5. What are the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity?

We can see that the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a mysterious supernatural reality about God that we need to believe. God being Three in One has enormous importance and implications for our lives.

God has created us in His image, and all creation is a reflection of Who He is and what He is like. God in Himself has both unity and diversity, so unity and diversity are seen in all that He has created. We see this balance between unity and diversity in many areas of life:

a. family life

A husband and wife are two people yet they become one flesh. In this they present a picture of the relationship between the Father and Son (1 Cor 11:3) as the husband's role mirrors and parallels that of the Father and the wife's role mirrors and parallels that of the Son. Here we see equality of importance and personhood, yet distinction and subordination in function, a reality seen also in the relation of children to parents.

b. church life

The church is "many members" yet "one body" (1 Cor 12:12). Each individual is to fulfill Christ's calling in his and her own life as Jesus joins every member together with others in One body of which He is the Head.

c. every area of life

In the work place there is a division of labor. There are lines of authority and areas of expertise, but everyone is part of the same team working toward the same goal. The individuals benefit as they provide excellence in workmanship and service that makes the company successful. The company gains the strength and stability of its employees' loyalty as it shows appreciation and consideration for their personal lives.

In an orchestra each instrument has a unique contribution. A lifetime of individual training to master an instrument finds its purpose and expression in repeatedly submitting to what each piece of music demands and the way the conductor wants the music performed. No musician in a symphony orchestra does what he or she pleases. Only in this uniting and orchestrating of diversity is harmony realized and achieved in its richness and fullness.

Political theories that emphasize government control, on the one hand, or the will of the people, on the other, struggle with the balance between unity and diversity that the Trinity manifests in love that never fails.