

# DOCTRINE MATTERS: ESSENTIALS TRUTHS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

## Message 5: God in Three Persons: The Trinity

We have already covered many of the attributes of God and although they teach us much of what God is like, they cannot help us with who He is in His being. From our previous study we would not understand that God has eternally existed in three persons, yet He is one God.

*The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. To study the Bible's teachings on the Trinity gives us great insight into the question that is at the center of all of our seeking after God: What is God like in Himself, in His very being, God exists in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet He is one God.*

*Wayne Grudem: Systematic Theology*

Why is it important to study the Doctrine of the Trinity?

*Westminster Shorter Catechism:*

*Q.1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*

1. How can you glorify a God who is \_\_\_\_\_?

2. If God remains unknown to you, how can you \_\_\_\_\_ Him?

(The following is a summary from *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* by Wayne Grudem)

### **Doctrine of the Trinity Defined:**

1. *God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*
2. *Each Person is fully God.*
3. *There is One God.*

*The word "Trinity" means "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness".*

The word "Trinity" is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible so where did the idea come from? Can we be sure it is a valid truth?

### **The Doctrine of the Trinity is Progressively Revealed in Scripture**

**1) Partial revelation in the Old Testament.** Some people believe the Doctrine of the Trinity is only found in the New Testament. However, if God has eternally existed as three persons, it would be surprising to find no indications of that in the Old Testament. Upon examination, we can find many indications that suggest or imply that God exists as more than one person.

#### **Genesis 1:26**

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....."*

What could the plural words "us" and "our" possibly mean? Some have claimed that it is a plural of majesty. A king might say, "We are not pleased." referring just to himself. However, there are no other examples of the use of this type of plural in Old Testament Hebrew.

Others claim that God is speaking to Angels here. But Angels did not take part in the creation, and man was not created in the image of Angels so this suggestion is not very convincing.

The best explanation, and one held almost unanimously by the Church fathers and earlier Theologians is that already in the first chapter of Genesis we have an indication of a \_\_\_\_\_ of persons in God Himself.  
(Other examples: *Genesis 3:22; Genesis 11:7*)

### **Isaiah 6:8**

*<sup>8</sup>And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."*

Notice the use of both the singular and the plural in this verse.

There are several other passages where one person is called "God" or "the Lord" and is distinguished from another person who is also said to be God:

### **Psalm 45:6,7**

*<sup>6</sup>Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; <sup>7</sup> you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;*

The King is called "God" whose throne is forever and ever. Then the God of this God has anointed this God. Two separate persons are called "God" (Hebrew *'Elohim*) In the New Testament the writer of Hebrews quotes this verse and applies it to Christ: "Your throne O God is forever and ever" Hebrews 1:8

### **Psalm 110:1**

*The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."*

Jesus quotes this verse and interprets it as David referring to two different Lords (Matthew 22:41-46), but who is David's "Lord" if not God Himself? And who could be saying to God, "Sit at my right hand" except someone who is also fully God. We know from the New Testament that this second God is referring to Jesus. It seems clear that David was aware of a plurality of persons in the one God.

### **Isaiah 63:10**

*But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.*

This passage suggests that the Holy Spirit is distinct from God himself (it is "His Holy Spirit"), and that this Holy Spirit can be grieved suggesting emotional capabilities characteristic of a distinct person.

There are many passages in the Old Testament that refer to "the angel of the Lord". The word translated "angel" simply means messenger. Since he is the messenger of the Lord then he is distinct from the Lord. In several of these passages this messenger is called "God" or "Lord" suggesting that these messengers are divine. Therefore, there must be a plurality of persons in the one God. (Genesis 16:13; Exodus 3:2-6; 23:20-22; Numbers 22:35 with 38; Judges 2:1-2; 6:11 with 14)

## **2) More complete revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament**

The New Testament opens with the appearance of Jesus Christ, the Son of God here on earth. It would only make sense that we would see the Doctrine of the Trinity more clearly defined. Let's start by looking at some verses where all three members of the Trinity are named together:

**Matthew 3:16-17**

*<sup>16</sup>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; <sup>17</sup>and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

All three members of the Trinity are together at this moment in time performing three distinctly different tasks. God the Father is speaking from Heaven, God the Son is being baptized, and God the Spirit is descending like a dove to indwell and empower the Son for ministry.

**Matthew 28:19**

*<sup>19</sup>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,*

At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry He gave a command to his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit naming all three members of the Trinity.

**1Corinthians 12:4**

*<sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*

The Trinity is involved in the giving and administering the Spiritual Gifts to the Believer.

**2 Corinthians 13:14**

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

The last verse in 2Corinthians lists the three persons of the Godhead.

**1Peter 1:2**

*<sup>2</sup>according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:*

**Jude 20,21**

*<sup>20</sup>But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; <sup>21</sup>keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*

The Scriptural evidence for the existence of the Trinitarian God is very clear in the Scriptures. We see it alluded to in the Old Testament and clarified in the New Testament.

**Three Statements Summarize the Biblical Teaching**

In one sense the Doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that we will never fully understand. However we can understand something of its truth by summarizing the teaching of Scripture in three statements:

1. God is three persons.
2. Each person is fully God.
3. There is one God.

We will now cover each in more detail:

**1) God is three persons**

This means that the Father is not the Son, nor is the Son the Father. Neither are they the Holy Spirit. Each of these three are distinct and unique persons. Many of the above passages bear this out but we will look at others that demonstrate this point:

## **John 1:1**

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God.*

Verse 14 tells us that the Word was made flesh so we know this is referring to Jesus. This Word was with God so that makes him distinct from the Father, it also says that the Word was God so Jesus is God just like the Father.

1 John 2:1 tells us that Jesus Christ is our advocate while Hebrews 7:25 says that Jesus Christ intercedes for us before the Father. In order for Jesus to be our advocate or intercede for us before the Father, He must be a person distinct from the Father.

Finally, the fact that the Son is not the Holy Spirit is evidenced by the fact that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to begin His work on the earth after Jesus' ascension. (John 14)

Some have questioned whether the Holy Spirit is really a person, rather than a "power" or "force" of God on the earth but the New Testament is quite clear that He is a distinct person with all the characteristics of an individual person.

### **Personal Characteristics of the Holy Spirit:**

Teaches; John 14:26

Bears witness; John 15:26, Romans 8:16

Interceding or praying for others; Romans 8:26-27

Can be lied to; Acts 6:3,9

Speaks; Acts 8:39, 13:2

Can be grieved by sin; Ephesians 4:30

From this list we can see that the Holy Spirit is indeed a distinct person.

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

**First**, God the Father is clearly God. It is obvious from both the Old and New Testament that the Father is clearly viewed as sovereign Lord over all. He is the One to whom Jesus prays.

**Next**, the Son is fully God. John 1:1-4 states that very clearly. The Word (Jesus) was with God and the Word was God. When Thomas doubted and Jesus challenged him to examine His broken body Thomas declared of Jesus: "My Lord and my God". (John 20:28) Both John and Jesus approved of Thomas' statement, John by writing it and Jesus by encouraging others to believe the same thing. There are many other passages that will be discussed under the study of Jesus Christ.

**Finally**, The Holy Spirit is declared to be God. Acts 5:3-4 Peter asks Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.....? You have not lied to men but to God." Peter clearly states that to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. David attributes the divine characteristic of omnipresence to the Spirit of God in Psalm 139:7-8 where he asks where he can flee from God's Spirit, whether heaven, or hades, the Spirit is everywhere. Paul states the Holy Spirit possesses omniscience in 1Corinthians 2:10-11 where he says that the Holy Spirit searches everything and comprehends the deep things of God.

### 3) There is One God

The Scripture teaches that there is one, and only one God. The three persons are one in essence, one in being. There are not three Gods, but one God in three persons.

#### Deuteronomy 6:4-5

<sup>4</sup> *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

#### Isaiah 45:5-6

<sup>5</sup> *I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 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.*

#### 1Timothy 2:5

<sup>5</sup> *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,*

#### Romans 3:30

*since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.*

The Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament are very clear that there is only one God

### 4) All Analogies have shortcomings: Any attempt to use natural illustrations to explain the Trinity fail. While they may be helpful on some elementary level they cannot adequately explain the Trinity.

- The three leaf clover is made up of three leaves but is still one clover. The problem here is that each leaf is only a third of the clover. Each member of the Trinity is all of God, not just a third of God.
- There are three forms of water; liquid, solid, gas. All three are one substance, water. The problem is that no quantity of water is all three totally at the same time, and they each have different properties or characteristics.
- An individual may be a fireman, a husband, and a father. The problem with this illustration is that the person can only operate in one role at a time. Also it is only one person, it ignores the interpersonal interaction between the three persons of the Trinity.

*The doctrine of the Trinity ...is truth for the heart. The fact that it cannot be satisfactorily explained, instead of being against it, is in its favor. Such a truth had to be revealed; no one could imagine it.*

A.W. Tozer

What Tozer is saying here is very interesting. His claim is that since man cannot explain the Trinity, he could not even conceive it. Man cannot conceive that which he cannot explain. Therefore the Trinity must have been supernaturally given.

There are no analogies we can use to adequately explain the Trinity. The Bible uses many analogies such as a shepherd, a shield, a rock, etc. The Bible uses no analogy at all to try to explain the Trinity except for the relationship between the Father and Son. It is best to conclude that there is no adequate analogy to explain the Trinity.

### **Errors have Come by Denying any of the Three Statements:**

Historically there have been several errors taught in the Church, some which exist today. Each error is brought about by ignoring one of the three basic statements taught by the Bible about the Trinity:

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

#### **1) Modalism**

This is the erroneous teaching by some that states that there is only one God and that he just changes jobs or “modes”. First God was the Father, then he came to earth and became the Son, died for our sin, raised from the dead, ascended, then came back as the Holy Spirit. One God, three forms, not three distinct persons. The greatest error is that it ignores the interpersonal relationship between the members of the Godhead. Whom did Jesus pray to, Himself? Before whom does Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede on our behalf? It also removes the heart of the atonement. Whose wrath did Christ absorb in our stead on the cross, his own? Whose justice was satisfied by Christ’s shed blood, his own? Only the Trinity as taught in the Scriptures explains our Salvation.

There are several denominations and groups that still hold to this error.

#### **2) Arianism**

Named for Arius the bishop of Alexandria that began this error that was fought by Augustine (who was Trinitarian) and condemned by the Council of Nicea in a.d. 325. Arius taught that God the Son was created by God the Father and before that time the Son did not exist, neither did the Holy Spirit. This became a very prominent teaching in the early Church and became quite a battle for the Trinitarians. They taught that Jesus was created before anything or anyone else and therefore is greater than all other creation. They said Jesus was “like the Father” but not “of the same nature” as the Father. They depended heavily on the passages in the Bible that state that Jesus is the “only begotten” of the Father translating it as the Father, creating the Son.

The modern day Arians would be the Jehovah’s Witnesses and in a different way the Mormons. Both believe that Jesus was a created human that became God.

#### **3) Tritheism**

Trithesim basically teaches that there are really three Gods, not one. It denies the obvious teaching of the Bible that there is one God. It is rare to find anyone that holds to this view today but the danger among Believers is to emphasize the three persons of the Godhead without acknowledging the one God.

### **Distinctions Between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit:**

After saying that each member of the Godhead is fully God and possesses all the attributes of God, are there any distinctions between the three persons of the Godhead?

#### **1) The Persons of the Trinity have different functions as relating to the world**

Regarding Creation:

God the Father spoke the creative words

God the Son carried out the creative process (Heb. 1:2)

God the Spirit hovered or moved over the waters (Gen. 1:2)

Regarding Redemption:

God the Father planned redemption and sent His Son into the world. (Jn. 3:16)

God the Son obeyed the Father and accomplished our redemption. (John 6:38)

God the Holy Spirit came to earth after the Son ascended to apply redemption to us. (Jn. 3:5-8)

## 2) The Persons of the Trinity eternally existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

When studying the attributes of God, you discussed the attribute of omnipresence which means that God is present everywhere. This also means He is omnipresent in regard to time too. Other ways of saying it is that God is outside of time (having created it He exists outside of time but He also works in and through time). God is eternal and unchanging, God is infinite and so possesses infinity. For God there is no past and there is no future. He experiences all of time at the same time which is very hard for us to understand being locked into time. This is important to understanding the eternality of the Trinity. The Father has always been the Father, the Son has always been the Son, and the Holy Spirit has always existed as the Holy Spirit. They did not sit down one day (which places God in time) and decide who would do what. They did not draw straws or roll the dice. They have always been who they are and have held the positions of leadership and subordination that they now display.

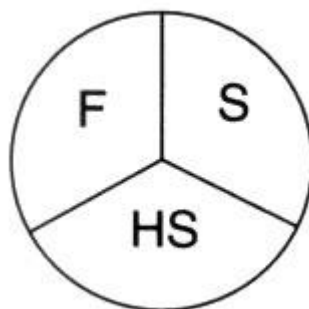
God told Moses to tell Israel that “I am” has sent you when Moses asked for God’s name. (Gen. 3:13-15) Notice God did not say “I was, or I will be”.

Jesus laid claim to the same name on several occasions stating that “I am”. (Study John for a list of the “I am” claims of Christ.

The Scriptures state that “God is love.” (1John 4) It does not say that God became love. If the Trinity did not exist then God could not claim to be love until He had created something to love. God, being one, has always existed in a perfect love relationship within the three Persons of the Godhead. God truly is love and has been so eternally.

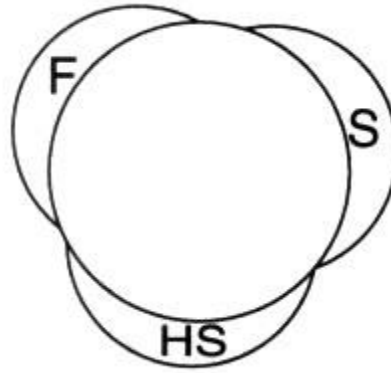
## 3) How does the one God (His being) relate to the three Persons (His relationships)?

It is important to state that each person of the Godhead is fully God which means that each person has the whole fullness of God’s being within Himself. Each person is not one-third God and it takes all three to add up to God. The Son is fully God as well as the Father and the Holy Spirit.



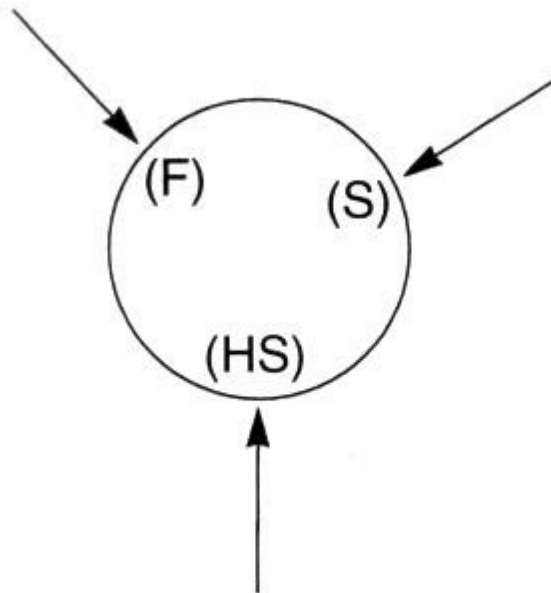
God’s Being is not divided into three equal parts.

We should not think that the personal distinctions of each of the Persons of the Trinity are any kind of additional attributes added to the Godhead as illustrated below.



The personal distinctions in the Trinity are not something added onto God's real Being

Even though there is one God, and all the persons of the Godhead have all the attributes of God, we have to say that each person is distinct and real, they are not just different ways of looking at God. That is Modalism which we covered previously. The following diagram is therefore also wrong:



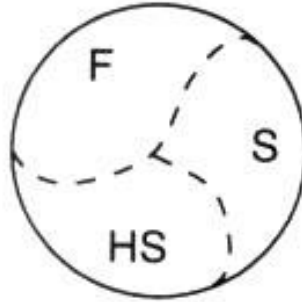
The Persons of the Trinity are not just three different ways to look at God.

Rather, we need to think of the Trinity in such a way that the reality of the three Persons is maintained, and each person is seen as relating to the others as an "I" (first person) and a "you" (second person) and a "he" (third person).

The distinction between persons is not one of "Being", but one of "Relationships". Concerning attributes, there is no difference between the Persons. The difference is the way they "relate" to each other and to creation. The unique quality of the Father is the way He relates as Father to the Son and Holy Spirit. The unique quality of the Son is the way He relates as Son, and the unique quality of the Holy Spirit is the way He relates as Spirit.



The following diagram may be helpful (although no diagram adequately depicts the Trinity.)



There are three distinct Persons, and the Being of each Person is equal to the whole being of God.

There is one other explanation I found that helped to shed more light on the Trinity for me. This is a quote from the theologian and apologist Norman Geisler:

*“While essence (or being) is “what” you are, person is “who” you are. So God is one “what” but three “who’s”.*

As explanation- each person is a human being which is your “what” and also each person is an individual person which is your “who”. There are millions of human beings and they all possess the same attributes which is their “what”. But each human being is a unique person, there are no two alike, this is their “who”. Each human possesses only one “what”, and only one “who”.

God is unique. There is only one God, not millions and He has one essence or being and that is God’s “what”. This one God however possesses three persons or three “who’s”.

No human being can fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. Any explanation is only an attempt to get us closer to the truth. The practicality of this knowledge will help us better share truth with others as we share the Gospel. It is a good idea to include the Trinity’s involvement in the Redemption Plan as we share the Gospel with others. It should also increase our awe and amazement toward our God which should increase our love for Him, deepen our prayer life to Him, and expand our worship of Him.

We would do well to meditate on these things!