

The Triune God

Main truth: There is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Key passages:

Deuteronomy 6:4

Matthew 3:16–17

Matthew 28:19

Isaiah 40:18

John 1:1–3, 14

Acts 5:3–4

1. Opening Question: Can We Understand Everything About God?

Should we expect to understand everything about God? Why or why not?

Over the past several weeks, we have learned that God is infinite, holy, good, all-powerful, sovereign, unchanging, all-knowing, present everywhere, just, loving, and self-existent. If God is truly infinite, we should not be surprised when we cannot fully comprehend everything about him. We can know God truly because he has revealed himself to us. But we cannot know God exhaustively—we cannot understand everything about him.

Today we are beginning to study the Trinity. The word Trinity means “three in one.” The Bible teaches that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We may not understand how God can be three persons and yet one God. Nevertheless, we believe that he is because this is how God has revealed himself.

2. One God

Read Deuteronomy 6:4: “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

The doctrine of the Trinity does not teach that there are three gods. Christianity is firmly monotheistic: we believe in only one God. Other passages reinforce this truth:

Isaiah 45:5: “I am the LORD, and there is no other.”

1 Corinthians 8:4: “There is no God but one.”

James 2:19: “You believe that God is one. Good!”

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate gods who cooperate with one another. There is only one divine being—one God.

Whole-group discussion

Why is it important to begin our study of the Trinity by establishing that there is only one God?

3. The Old Testament Points Toward the Trinity

The Old Testament clearly teaches that there is one God. It does not reveal the Trinity as fully as the New Testament does, but it contains important signs that prepare us for the fuller revelation to come.

We also see several incidents in the Old Testament that we call Christophanies or Theophanies. These are distinct appearances of God in the Old Testament. A Theophany is a shrouded appearance of God the Father. This appearance of God is typically shrouded in a cloud or fire. A Christophany is an appearance of God in a human like form. These Christophanies typically are referred to as the "Angel of the Lord"

There are also several times in the Old Testament when the Spirit of God would come upon a person.

Family Discussion: Try to come up with an example of Theophany, Christophany, and when the Spirit of God came upon a person in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament gives us genuine signs of God's triune nature, but we should not force every Old Testament appearance of God into a complete explanation of the Trinity. God revealed this truth progressively—more clearly over time. With the coming of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, the picture becomes much clearer.

4. The New Testament Reveals the Trinity Clearly

Read Matthew 3:16–17: "When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.'"

Who is present in this passage?

The Son is being baptized.

The Holy Spirit descends upon the Son.

The Father speaks from heaven.

The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father. They are distinct persons, and they are present at the same time.

Read 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."

Notice that Jesus says name, not "names." There is one divine name, yet the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each named distinctly. Each person is fully God. The Bible teaches that all three persons are fully divine:

The Father is God—John 6:27.

The Son is God—John 1:1–3, 14;

The Holy Spirit is God—Acts 5:3–4.

The Father is not one-third of God. The Son is not one-third of God. The Holy Spirit is not one-third of God. Each person possesses the fullness of the one divine nature. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God.

The doctrine of the Trinity can therefore be summarized in three biblical statements:

There is one God.

God exists as three distinct persons.

Each person is fully God.

5. Why We Will Not Use an Illustration

People frequently try to explain the Trinity using objects from creation. They may compare God to water, an egg, a three-leaf clover, or one person performing three different roles. We will not use any of those illustrations because God is not like anything he has made. Every illustration eventually distorts something the Bible teaches.

Some illustrations make it sound as though God is made of three parts. Others make it sound as though the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely three roles played by one person. Still others make it sound as though there are three separate gods. No picture from creation can adequately explain the uncreated God.

Read Isaiah 40:18: “With whom will you compare God? What likeness will you set up for comparison with him?”

Our goal is not to create a mental picture of the Trinity. Our goal is to receive, believe, and faithfully repeat what God has revealed about himself. Mystery does not mean that the Trinity is nonsense or a contradiction. Christians do not say that God is one person and three persons. We say that God is one in his divine being and three in person. We understand what God has told us, even though we cannot fully explain how it is possible.

6. The Error of Modalism

As we study the Trinity, we must avoid an error called Modalism.

Modalism teaches that God is only one person who appears in three different modes, forms, or roles. According to this view, God sometimes acts as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit.

For example, one human being might be a father to his children, a husband to his wife, and a pastor to his church. He has three roles, but he is still only one person. That is not an accurate picture of the Trinity.

The Bible does not teach that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three roles played by one divine person. It teaches that they are three distinct, eternal persons within the one God.

Return to Matthew 3:16–17, the baptism of Jesus:

The Son is standing in the water.

The Holy Spirit descends upon him.

The Father speaks from heaven.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are present and acting distinctly at the same time. God is not simply switching from one role to another.

We also see their personal relationship in John 14:16, where Jesus says: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.” The Son asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not talking to himself or promising to return in a different costume. The Father, Son, and Spirit know, love, and relate to one another.

Modalism denies something essential that God has revealed about himself. It says that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not truly distinct persons.

It also confuses the gospel:

The Father really sent the Son.

The Son willingly obeyed the Father.

The Son really prayed to the Father.

The Father raised and exalted the Son.

The Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit.

These are real relationships between distinct divine persons—not one person pretending to speak to himself. We must hold together both biblical truths:

God is one divine being.

God eternally exists as three distinct persons.

Family Discussion Examine and discuss the following Diagram

