

THEOLOGY SESSION 3

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD THE TRINITY

To believe and love the Trinity is to possess the key of theology.¹

Charles Spurgeon

Nothing we do as evangelicals makes sense if it is divorced from a strong experiential and doctrinal grasp of the coordinated love of Jesus and the Spirit, worked out against the horizon of the Father's love. Personal evangelism, conversational prayer, devotional Bible study, authoritative preaching, world missions, and assurance of salvation all presuppose that life in the gospel is life in communion with the Trinity. Forget the Trinity and you forget why we do what we do; you forget who we are as gospel Christians; you forget how we got to be like we are.²

Fred Sanders

Group Work: What are the theological implications of these verses in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity? (Mark 12:28-30; Mark 1:9-11; John 16:7-15; John 17:1-5; John 17:6-10; John 17:11-19; John 17:20-26; Ephesians 1:3-14; Hebrews 1:1-12)

¹Charles Haddon Spurgeon, (Spurgeon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons, 189-200 London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872). 389.

²Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How The Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 9.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

The word *trinity* means “triunity” or “three-in-oneness”

*God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.*³ (Wayne Grudem)

*There are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God, and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely; the Son is the Son uniquely; and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely. All three have the same eternity, the same immutability, the same majesty, and the same power.*⁴ (Augustine)

*The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three in person.*⁵ (Matt Perman)

*The one, eternal, and living God of the Bible, the only real God there is, is the God who has forever known himself, and who in the history of salvation has revealed himself to us, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To deny this truth is to lapse into heresy.*⁶ (Timothy George)

³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 226.

⁴Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr.) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 10.

⁵Matt Perman, “What is the Doctrine of the Trinity?,” *Desiring God*, January 23, 2006, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity>.

⁶Timothy George, “The Nature of God: Being, Attributes, and Acts,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 182.

FOUNDATIONS OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT

The Old Testament:

- *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)*
- *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Genesis 1:26)*
- *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." (Psalm 110:1)*
- *Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there." And now the Lord GOD [**the Father**] has sent me [**the Son**], and his Spirit [**the Spirit**]. (Isaiah 48:16)*
- *In all their affliction he [**the Father**] was afflicted, and the angel of his presence [**the Son**] saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit [**the Spirit**]; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them. (Isaiah 63:9-10)*

The New Testament:

- *And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)*
- *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; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17)*
- *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. (Matthew 28:19)*
- *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)*
- *...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. (1 Peter 1:2)*
- *But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. (Jude 20-21)*

In sum, while the word 'trinitas' is not found anywhere in the Bible, the Scriptures from first to last are thoroughly Trinitarian. What was foreshadowed in the Old Testament became explicit in the New with the historical reality of God 'manifested in the flesh' (1 Tim 3:16).⁷ (Timothy George)

⁷Timothy George, "The Nature of God: Being, Attributes, and Acts," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 187.

HERESIES REGARDING THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Monarchianism

Monarchianism (also known as Sabellianism after one of their leaders, Sabellius [early 3rd century] was a heresy that was developed by Christian individuals who were trying to formulate an understanding of the doctrine of God. Monarchians, in nature, were those who desired to stress the absolute Oneness of God as the supreme ruler over all creation. As Harold O. J. Brown explains, “The name ‘monarchian’ is applied to groups that sought to stress a fundamental biblical and Christian truth, namely, the conviction that God is one, the sole monarch of the universe.”⁸ These individuals, in an attempt to be faithful to God would make a severe mistake in their understanding of God and his existence as three distinct persons who are equally God.

Monarchianism refers to two different schools of thought within the umbrella of the heresy, *adoptionism* and *modalism*. Though these two strains of modalism are in sharp contrast in their view of the Trinity, and more particularly the person of Jesus, they are unified in an attempt to falsely explain a mystery of the Christian faith that even the most devout followers are prone to fall into. Again, Harold O. J. Brown explains, “Thus two dramatically different convictions are embraced by...‘monarchianism.’ What they have in common is their conviction that the fundamental unity and oneness of God does not permit a second Person to share the titles of deity.”⁹

→ Adoptionism (dynamic monarchianism)

1. Believed that Jesus was a man who was endowed with a special power from God
2. Used the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus is baptized and the Spirit of God descends upon him as foundational in their assertion that Jesus was not God
3. Viewed the event of Jesus’ baptism as the moment when God adopted Jesus as his son

*Adoptionism is the view that Jesus lived as an ordinary man until his baptism, but then God ‘adopted’ Jesus as his ‘Son’ and conferred on him supernatural powers... Even after Jesus’ ‘adoption’ as the ‘Son’ of God, they would not think of him as divine in nature, but only as an exalted man whom God called his ‘Son’ in a unique sense.*¹⁰

→ Modalism (modalistic monarchianism)

*The word ‘modalism’ is unfamiliar to most Christians, yet it is the most common theological error among people who think themselves orthodox. It is the simplest way to explain the Trinity while preserving the oneness of God; unfortunately, it is incorrect.*¹¹

1. The three facets of the trinity – God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – exist as three different modes of God
2. God reveals himself under different aspects or modes in different ages—as the Father in Creation and in the giving of the Law, as the Son in Jesus Christ, and as the Holy Spirit after Christ’s ascension

⁸Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1998), 95.

⁹Ibid., 96.

¹⁰Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 245.

¹¹Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies*, 99.

3. Whereas adoptionism denies the deity of Jesus, modalism upholds the deity of Jesus but sacrifices his distinctness and his humanity
4. Modalists use the Gospel of John as the foundation of belief as Jesus repeatedly refers to the oneness between he and the Father

Arianism

1. Attributed to Arius, a 4th century Alexandrian Bishop
2. God the Father was eternal and too pure and infinite to appear on the earth. Therefore, God produced Christ the Son out of nothing as the first and greatest creation.
3. God the Father alone is self-existent
4. The Son, who is not self-existent, cannot be God
5. Used John 14:28 as proof text: *You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.*
6. Arianism was deemed heretical at the First Council of Nicea in 325 as was its chief proponent, Arius

Modern Heresies

1. **Universalism:** a liberal perspective that denies the deity of Jesus and the Spirit
2. **Oneness Pentecostalism:** a conservative perspective that argues for the deity of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus “only” is God. There is only one person in the Godhead and his name is Jesus. The “Father” and “Spirit” are only different names for different manifestations of the one God, Jesus.
3. **Tritheism (polytheism):** The only link between the three is that they share a common purpose or will. Stress is placed on the personhood of each, the essence of which is autonomy and independence.