

We Believe: Doctrines of Our Faith

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Few Christian claims cause visible confusion like the Trinity. When Christians claim to believe in one God, but then in the same breath claim that the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit are all God, we sound contradictory on the face of it. Yet, Christians have affirmed trinitarian beliefs since the earliest days of our movement specifically because Scripture describes God in this way.

The main question when dealing with the Trinity is whether we can accept that God is a very different kind of being from us but not wholly incomprehensible to us. He exists in a way that goes beyond full human understanding, but He describes Himself in terms that do make sense so that we have language to talk about Him. In much the same way that we can describe a 4-dimensional cube with mathematics but we cannot truly picture that cube in our minds, God goes beyond our experiential categories but not so far that we cannot know Him.

I. What is the Trinity?

A. The word "Trinity" describes the biblical teaching that only _____ God exists, but that He exists in _____ persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. There are two helpful ways of thinking about the persons within the Trinity.

1. First, the Bible affirms the existence and divinity of each person within the Trinity.

- Genesis 1:2 - "And the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters."
- Psalm 110:1 - "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'"
- Isaiah 9:6 - "For a child shall be born to us... and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father..."
- Matthew 3:16-17 - "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'"
- John 14:1-7 - "If you had known me, you would have known My Father, also; from now on, you know Him and have seen Him."

- John 14:15-17 – “I will ask My Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth...”

2. Second, the Bible gives _____ interactions between the three persons in the Trinity. Each person has a role with respect to the other two.

- The Father _____ and _____ the Son, but is Himself unbegotten.
- The Son is begotten by the Father and _____ to the Father’s will in love in part by representing the Father to us.
- The Spirit _____ (or is sent) from the Father and the Son together and serves as God’s presence with and in us.
- These relational dynamics distinguish the three persons as well as explain how God can exhibit attributes like love without having to first create some other beings.

B. Various cults will deny the Trinity by denying the full divinity of either _____ or the _____.

1. Unitarians only acknowledge God as one and not as three persons.
2. Jehovah’s Witnesses only acknowledge the Father as God.
3. Mormons deny that Jesus is divine.

II. What the Trinity is Not

A. Various _____ have been put forward trying to help people grasp the idea of the Trinity:

1. An _____ is one thing with three parts: yolk, white, and shell.
2. _____ can, under specific conditions, simultaneously be gas, liquid, and solid.
3. Sometimes the equation $__ \times __ \times __ = __$ is used to model the Trinity.

B. All analogies eventually _____, and some even lead to incorrect understandings of the Trinity.

1. With eggs, each of the three parts is a completely different _____ than the others.

2. With water, the three states of matter are different _____ of the same substance.

3. $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ does not indicate any _____ between the persons of the Trinity.

C. The breakdown of these models usually ends up in one of a few common heresies about God's existence.

1. Perhaps the most common error is _____, which claims that God is one but that He appears in form of various persons at different time (that is, He has various modes of appearing).

- This error is difficult to square with passages like Jesus's baptism or the Transfiguration, where all three persons of the Trinity appear at once.
- The water analogy falls in this category.

2. The second most common error—often unintentional—is to devolve into _____ (describing three gods) by making too much of a distinction between the persons of the Trinity.

- The egg analogy falls into this category.

D. A still-imperfect but (hopefully) more helpful analogue to the Trinity comes from God's institution of _____ in Genesis 2.

1. When a man and woman get married, God describes it as two persons becoming one ("the two shall become one flesh").

2. Considered this way, we not only bear God's image as individuals, but that image carries over into the most foundational human relationship.

3. This analogy is actually more helpful in the reverse direction because it gives us a better picture of what marriage is supposed to be based on a prior understanding of the Trinity.

III. What Does It Matter? (1 Peter 1)

A. Our salvation and spiritual development are _____ outside of the Trinitarian nature of God.

1. If the Father and Son were not different persons within the Trinity, God could not have both received and poured out the _____ due us for our sins.
2. If the Son and the Spirit were not different persons, God could not have _____ about the coming Christ and _____ the coming Christ.
3. If God were not one, then one of the three persons would have to be the "_____ _____" by whom holiness and justice are measured. Then the other two would be "lesser Gods."

B. We have a responsibility to interact with and respond to all three members of the Trinity according to their specific roles in our spiritual life if we hope to grow into the _____ we should be.

IV. Interlude: Why Are We Studying These Things?

A. Everyone has a worldview that informs what is "_____ " to believe as truth. You may approach everything you learn about the Bible or about God as "normal." Most people—many Christians included—don't.

B. How we _____ is always driven by what we think is normal to believe. Most people who grow up in the church and later reject the faith do so because their worldview was never based on the Bible; it merely included the palatable parts of the biblical story.

C. Our goal in studying together is twofold:

1. To build a community where _____ things that go even beyond our full comprehension is not only acceptable, but also normal.
2. To be a community that _____ on what we believe so that our experiences can reinforce our beliefs.