

The School of Christian Theology

Lesson 4

The Trinitarian Nature of God: What is God Like?

Objective: To understand God's trinitarian nature, to see its importance to the Christian faith and life, and to delight in the Triune God.

I. The Importance of Trinitarianism

"The doctrine of the Trinity shapes and structures Christian faith and practice in every way, distinguishing it from all world religions. From the Enlightenment to the present day, it has been widely assumed that we all worship the same God with different names; every religion brings its piece of the puzzle to the game. Despite its cheery optimism, this is actually a disrespectful position to take, not only toward Christianity but toward other religions... We do not disagree merely over words or the finer points of theology, but over the identity of the object of our worship and the only name on whom we are to call for salvation."

– Michael Horton (1964-Present), *Pilgrim Theology*, 89

"It is only when you grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God... What we assume would be a dull or peculiar irrelevance turns out to be the source of all that is good in Christianity. Neither a problem nor a technicality, the triune being of God is the vital oxygen of Christian life and joy." – Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 18

"In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable." – Augustine (354-430), *On the Trinity*

II. The Trinity in the Bible

A. Monotheism

Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

Exodus 20:2-3, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

Isaiah 45:5-6, I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
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.

B. Jesus Is God

John 1:1-2, 14, 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, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 14:8-10a, Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"

C. Early Christian Identity and Worship Was Shaped by God's Trinitarian Nature

The earliest and most basic confession of the church: "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11; cf. John 20:28; Acts 2:36; 10:36; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 4:5)¹

Romans 10:9, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

1 Corinthians 12:3, Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

The very first action of the Christian life is Christian baptism in the Triune Name of God:

Matthew 28:18-20, And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

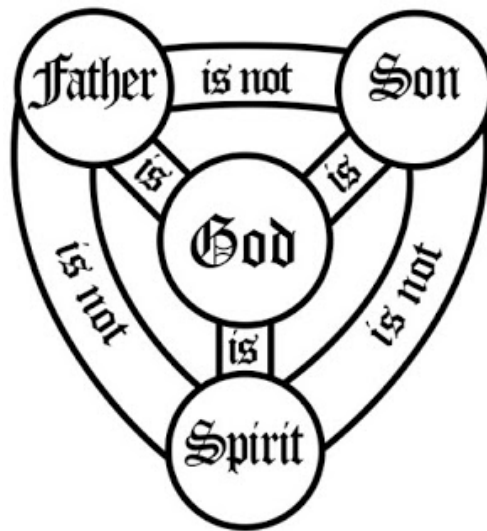
D. Do We Still Believe in One God? Or Are There Two Gods? Or Three?

¹ This seems to be synonymous with claims that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ and that he is God/the Son of God (Mt. 1:1; 14:33; 16:16; 27:54; Jn. 1:49; 11:27; 20:28, 31; Mk. 1:1; 15:39; Lk. 1:35; Acts 5:42; 9:20; 17:3; Rom. 1:4; 1 Jn. 4:15)

III. The Basics of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Seven Statements²

1. There is only one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6-8; 45:5,18,22; 46:9; 1 Tim. 2:5; Gal. 3:20; Rom. 3:30; Jas. 2:19)
2. The Father is God (Eph. 4:6; 1 Cor. 8:6)
3. The Son is God (Matt. 14:33; 16:16; Mk. 1:1; Lk. 1:32,35; Jn. 1:1; 5:18; 20:21)
4. The Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3,4)
5. The Father is not the Son (Jn. 1:1; 17:1-5; Mt. 3:16-17)
6. The Son is not the Spirit (Jn. 14:15-17; 16:7; Acts 2:33; Mt. 3:16-17)
7. The Spirit is not the Father (Jn. 14:15-17; Acts 2:33; Mt. 3:16-17)



Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 8. *Are there more Gods than one?*

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

Q. 9. *How many persons are there in the Godhead?*

A. There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.

² Taken from Kevin DeYoung in *The New City Catechism Devotional*, 26.

IV. Why Does This Matter?

A. Worship

God says again and again in the Old Testament that it is sinful (in fact, the chief sin) to worship anyone other than Him, or to attribute to anyone else what only he has done and can do (Is. 42:8; 45:5-6; Ex. 20:2-3; 32:4).

Isaiah 42:8, I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.

If we are worshipping Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and they are not truly God (or if we are giving them *equal* praise and glory, when they are lesser gods), then we are committing idolatry.

B. Revelation

Scripture makes amazing statements about Jesus revealing the Father to us.

John 1:1-2, 14, 18 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, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

John 14:8-9, Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

Matthew 11:25-27, At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Colossians 1:15, 19, He is the image of the invisible God... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Hebrews 1:1-3, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

If Jesus is not truly God (or is a lesser god), then he cannot accurately reveal the Father to us in the way he claims to.

C. The Being of God

God isn't just triune, he is eternally triune, which means before the world was created, before there was anything other than God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were joyfully glorifying and loving one another, having no lack or deficiency.

John 17:4-5, 24 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed... you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Single-person gods must, by definition, have spent eternity in absolute solitude. Before creation, having no other persons with whom they could commune, they must have been entirely alone. Love for others, then, cannot go very deep in them if they can go for eternity without it. And so, not being essentially loving, such gods are inevitably less than lovely. They may demand our worship, but they cannot win our hearts. They must be served with gritted teeth.

How wonderfully different it is with the triune God. In John 17:24, Jesus speaks of how the Father loved Him even before the creation of the world. That is the triune, living God: a Father, whose very being has eternally been about loving His Son, pouring out the Spirit of love and life on Him. Here is a God who is love, who is so full of life and blessing that for eternity He has been overflowing with it... Here in the triune God, in other words, is an infinitely satisfying God, one who is the very fountainhead of all goodness, truth, and beauty.” – Michael Reeves, “Delighting in the Trinity” (article)

D. The Atonement

One reason Jesus had to be fully God was that he needed to be able to take the full wrath of God for us. If he is not God (or if he is a lesser God) we can have no confidence that he has fully satisfied God's wrath.

Heidelberg Catechism 17. Q. Why must [Jesus] at the same time be true God?
A. He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath, and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

E. Indwelling

When Jesus's disciples are sad and afraid that he is going away, he promises that he himself will not leave them as orphans, but he himself will come to them.

John 14:18-20, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (cf. Col. 1:27)

But Jesus also makes clear that the one who will come to them is the Holy Spirit.

John 14:16-17, 25-26, And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you... These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ 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 have said to you."

Jesus cannot possibly say that *he* will come to them if he is not truly one with the Holy Spirit. We also cannot believe the promises of God in Scripture that God dwells in us if the Holy Spirit is not God, or is a lesser god (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16).

V. Trinitarian Heresies³

How can we conceive of the fact that there is but one true God, and yet God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? The **heresies** of history typically asked good questions but settled on wrong or partial answers.

Tritheism—The Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three independent divine beings; three separate gods who share the 'same substance'. This says that there is a species or genus of "God" (just like there is a species or genus of 'human' or 'dog'), and that there are three beings within that species—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This directly contradicts Scripture (which continually asserts monotheism), and takes away the exactness of Jesus's revelation of the Father.

Partialism—The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. Therefore, each of the persons of the Trinity is only partially God, only becoming fully God when they come together. They each represent a different "aspect" or "side" of God. This contradicts our conception of God as simple (not made up of parts), but it also destroys the things which are most precious in the doctrine of the Trinity (as we saw above).

³ A great little book on the subject of early Christian heresies is Justin Holcomb, *Know the Heretics* (Zondervan, 2014).

Modalism—The three persons of the Trinity as different “modes” of the Godhead. Adherents believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons, but different modes of God's self-revelation. A typical modalist approach is to regard God as presenting himself as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Spirit in sanctification. In other words, God exists as Father, Son, or Spirit in different eras, but never as triune (i.e., all three at once). Taught most famously by Sabellius, a third century Roman presbyter. A later version of this teaching was called Patripassianism, because it taught that the Father (Latin, *pater*) suffered (Latin, *passio*) on the cross.

This renders ridiculous or deceptive some things we read in Scripture, like the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17) or the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8) or Jesus praying to the Father (Jn. 17:1ff; Matt. 11:25-26).

Subordinationism—The Father is most fully God and the Son and the Spirit are ontologically inferior (i.e., subordinate). In other words, they are not equal in power and glory.

The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,

God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,

begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us and for our salvation

came down from heaven

and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,

and was made man;

and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered and was buried;

and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,

and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father;

and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life,

who proceeds from the Father and the Son;

who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;

who spoke by the prophets;

and we believe in one holy catholic¹ and apostolic church;

we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;

and we look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. Amen.

VI. Application for Reading Scripture

Each person of the Trinity is fully God, which means that all of the attributes described in Class 3 (simplicity, aseity, immutability, impassibility, eternity, omnipresence, sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, love, justice, mercy, etc.) are true of *all three persons* of the Godhead. The Son is not the loving and merciful one and the Father the wrathful one. The Spirit is not the all-wise and the Father all-powerful (those would be partialism). It's not that the Father is immutable but the Son and Spirit are subject to change (that would be subordinationism). Each person is truly God.

Since many of the great statements of our doctrine of God are in the Old Testament. It is important that we banish the idea that the God of the Old Testament is the Father, and the Son and Spirit show up in the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament is the Triune God; there is no other God than the eternal Triune God of the Bible. So, these statements are statements about the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

Psalm 115:3, Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Exodus 34:5-8, The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

Isaiah 46:8-11, Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'
calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

VII. How Do the Three Persons Relate To One Another?

A. Trinitarian Terminology

Immanent Trinity – The hidden trinitarian communion (sometimes you will hear this referred to as the ontological Trinity)

Economic Trinity – The revealed activity of the triune God in creation, redemption, and consummation

Ad Intra – Who God is in himself

Ad Extra – God's actions outside of himself

The point of this distinction is similar to the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology (knowing God as he knows himself, versus knowing God in the way he has revealed himself to his finite creatures). We only have the knowledge of God that he has given us, and God has primarily revealed himself through his works (*ad extra*); he has revealed precious little about who he is *in his essence* (*ad intra*). So, one caution we need to take, is that we don't take things that God has revealed to us about the shape of his work in the world (*ad extra*) and project that back onto who he is in himself (*ad intra*).

B. Personal Properties

Q. 10. What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead?

A. It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.

The way the Scriptures distinguish between the three persons of the Trinity *ad intra* is not by chronological order (the Father came first, then the Son, then the Spirit), or by a hierarchy of power or glory (the Son and Spirit somehow being lesser than the Father). The way the Bible distinguishes between the persons is by their **relations of origin**.

“There is nothing that the Father is that the Son and the Spirit are not, except for being the Father. There is nothing that the Son is that the Father and Spirit are not, except for being the Son. And there is nothing that the Spirit is that the Father and the Son are not, except for being the Spirit... That is to say, each divine person is equally and identically the one true and living God; the only real distinctions between the persons are their relations to each other.” – Scott Swain, 60-61

The Athanasian Creed (c. 450 A.D.)

...The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone.
The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone.
The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.
Accordingly, there is one Father, not three fathers;
there is one Son, not three sons;
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.
None in this Trinity is before or after, none is greater or smaller; in their
entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.
So in everything, as was said earlier, the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, is to be
worshiped.
Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the Trinity...

“The person of the Father eternally communicates his simple essence to the person of the Son in eternal generation [i.e., begetting]. In similar fashion, just as the Father and the Son have life in themselves, so they have granted the Spirit to have life in himself. The persons of the Father and the Son eternally communicate their simple essence to the Spirit in eternal spiration.” – Swain, 62

C. The Trinitarian Shape of God’s Works

The actions that God does in the world (God’s works) can be summarized in the works of creation, redemption, and consummation. And these external works of God have a Trinitarian Shape, proceeding from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. However, before we get there, more grammar.

All God’s external works are indivisible works of the one God. God does not take a “divide and conquer” approach to the works of creation, redemption, and consummation. Rather than “dividing up the work” theologians speak of “appropriations” of God’s work. The Father initiates God indivisible works, the Son accomplishes them, and the Holy Spirit brings those works to their crowning effects.

This can be seen in the work of creation, where the Father creates by means of his word (the Son), and then the Spirit hovers over the face of the waters and brings order to chaos (Gen. 1:1-3). In the work of redemption, the Father plans redemption and sends the Son to accomplish the work (in the power of the Holy Spirit and in constant fellowship with his Father), and the Spirit brings the accomplishment of that work to fruition by applying it to believers. In the work of consummation, the Father initiates the end of the present evil age and the beginning of the age to come, the Son executes his judgment and is wedded to his bride, and the Spirit completes his work of sanctification in believers by glorifying them in joy and perfection.

And while all the works of the Triune God are indivisible, we must also recognize that Scripture specially identifies the persons with those works in different ways. So, the Father is specially identified as the agent of creation (Eph. 3:9; Jms. 1:17; Rev. 4:11). The Son is specially identified with the work of redemption (2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 5:9-10), and the Spirit is specially identified with the work of sanctification (1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13).

D. Another (Modern) Error

Eternal Functional Subordinationism—This teaches that what distinguishes the members of the Trinity is not an ontological hierarchy, but a functional hierarchy or a hierarchy of wills. So, the Son and Spirit eternally submit to the Father’s will.

While there is certainly order in the Trinity (“the Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone,” from the Athanasian Creed) the Church has never confessed hierarchy of any kind. Additionally, one of the things that belongs to the essence of the Trinity is the divine will. There is one will in God, not three wills.⁴ And so to create a hierarchy of wills is also to change our doctrine of the divine essence.⁵

“The reason for attending to the Bible’s Trinitarian discourse, and for discipling our minds and lips before the radiance of God’s simple light, is not to explain God’s triune life [or to use it as a proof text for our social hobby horse] but to stand in awe of it, to adore it, and to embrace it as it unfolds itself in Scripture.” – Scott Swain, 63

VIII. Communion & Doxology

John 17:20-26, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (see also 1 Jn. 1:1-4; 2:24)

⁴ Next week we will talk about different senses of that one divine will (i.e., hidden will and revealed will), but the different senses are not distinguished by the persons of the Trinity.

⁵ For a good summary of the critique against Eternal Functional Subordination, see Kevin DeYoung: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/distinguishing-among-the-three-persons-of-the-trinity-within-the-reformed-tradition/>

Revelation 4:8-11; 5:8-14,

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Suggested Further Reading on the Trinity

Delighting in the Trinity by Michael Reeves

The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything by Fred Sanders

The Trinity: An Introduction by Scott Swain

The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship by Robert Letham

Communion with the Triune God by John Owen

Readings for Next Class

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 3 & 5

WLC 12-14, 18-20

WSC 7-8, 11-12

Additional Readings for Next Class on God's Decree and Providence

Confessing the Faith: A reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith by Chad

VanDixhoorn, Chapters 3 & 5

"The Doctrine of God's Sovereignty" and "God's Sovereignty in Everyday Life" from *Do You Believe? 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life* by Paul David Tripp