

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 9

What Does It Mean That God Is a Trinity?

One of the many realities that makes Christianity unique is the doctrine of the Trinity, which Christians have maintained since the first century, long before it was stated in creedal form in the fourth century. The earliest believers certainly did not understand it based on a significant depth of reflection—that took a while—and though it is not succinctly stated in any one verse, it is the clear and unavoidable implication of many biblical texts.

Simply stated, the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one in essence (or being, or nature) and three in person, each of the three persons fully and eternally sharing in the one divine essence. This would be a logical contradiction if the doctrine were affirming that God is one and three in the same way at the same time. However, the affirmation is that God is one in one aspect (essence) and three in a different aspect (person).

Contrary to what some think, the Trinity is not an intriguing yet impractical theological oddity; rather, it is absolutely integral to the Christian faith, as we will see. The doctrine is not irrational, but it is beyond the perfect comprehension of us humans; it does involve mystery. This should not overly concern us, for God himself is beyond our perfect comprehension.

Scripture Teaches the Trinity

Both Testaments are clear: There is *one* true God. Judaism is renowned for being strictly monotheistic; Deuteronomy 6:4 states, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (see also Psalm 86:8–10; Isaiah 45:14; 46:9). The New Testament does not deviate. For example, “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5; see also 1 Corinthians 8:4–6; Ephesians 4:6; James 2:19).

Regarding the threeness of God, the Old Testament is less clear but includes strong hints. For instance, there are plural personal pronouns, such as in Genesis 1:26: “Then God said,

“Let *us* make mankind in *our* image, in *our* likeness” (see also Genesis 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8). Other texts, like Isaiah 61:1, make distinction between the divine persons: “The Spirit [the Holy Spirit] of the Sovereign LORD [the Father] is on me [the Son of God or Messiah], because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (see also Isaiah 48:16; 63:9–10).

The divine threeness is revealed more clearly in the New Testament. There are texts that affirm Jesus as God and the Spirit as God, with the Father (more on this in later chapters). There are texts that mention all three persons together, the most well-known being the Great Commission: “Go 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; see also 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4–6).

Interestingly, the word *name* is in the singular, even though three persons are “named.” There are also events when all three persons are present or involved, as at Jesus’ baptism, when the Father speaks from heaven, referring to Jesus as his Son, and the Spirit descends upon Jesus as a dove (Matthew 3:16–17), and in Jesus’ prayer, when he, the Son, asks the Father to send the Spirit (John 14:16–17).

Errors Regarding the Trinity

Some have gone wrong in their efforts to make the nature of God understandable. For example, some Christians have believed—and some people have accused all Christians of believing—in three *gods*; that is an error called tritheism. However, the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is that there is only one true God, not three.

Other Christians have believed that there is one God while denying that God is three persons. Rather, they say, the one God reveals himself in different ways, or modes, at different times: Sometimes he is the Father, sometimes the Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit, but not all three at the same time. This mistake, called modalism, would solve the mystery but does not adequately account for events where all three persons are present and involved at the same time (as mentioned above).

Arianism, another attempt to “solve” the Trinity, is named after Arius (c. 250–336), who taught that the Father is eternal God, and he created the Son, who in turn created the Spirit. This is also known as subordinationism, for it implies that the Son is subordinate/inferior to

the Father and that the Spirit is subordinate/inferior to the Father and the Son. Arianism, which holds that the Son and the Spirit are not *fully* God, was condemned as heresy in AD 325.

Orthodox Statement of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Due to misunderstandings such as these, in the fourth century the early church developed what is known as the **Nicene Creed**: *I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the 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.... And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and Son together is worshiped and glorified....*

Implications of the Trinity

The Trinitarian nature of God is vitally important and should have significant impact on our lives. Here are a few suggestions.

First, authentic worship is at stake. God has revealed himself as Trinitarian. Since true worshipers must worship God in spirit and in *truth* (John 4:23–24), we cannot truly worship him apart from regarding him as he is, even if we do not perfectly comprehend what that means.

Second, an all-sufficient basis for salvation for all who will believe is at stake. The need was for a sacrifice of infinite value to pay for the many sins of many people. If Jesus is anything less than fully and eternally God, his limitations would prevent him from fully accomplishing the work of salvation.

Third, healthy personal relationships with the Father, with the Son, and with the Spirit are at stake. To the degree that we do not accept and embrace the fullness of God as he has revealed himself, we will be unable to develop meaningful intimacy with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, healthy personal relationships between believers are at stake. Christian relationships are to be modeled after and reflect the perfect unity and love that exist between the three persons of the Trinity. Jesus prayed “that all of [my followers] may be

one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.... that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me” (John 17:21–23). God is love; love has been eternally active among the Trinity’s persons, infinitely before God created other beings to love. We are to reflect this in our love for one another (1 John 4:7–21), “being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2).

The doctrine of the Trinity is a *precious* truth that should continually draw us back to contemplation of our amazing God. And it is a *practical* truth that should profoundly affect how we live as Christians.

FUN FACT

Tertullian, an early Latin-speaking theologian (c. 160–c. 225), was the first to use the term *trinitas* in discussing God’s nature. He also used *persona* to refer to the diversity within the one being of God. Apparently, Tertullian coined 509 new nouns, 284 new adjectives, and 161 new verbs. I guess the lesson is: If words fail, make some up.