

## The Doctrine of the Trinity – Part II

In the last study, we looked at some of the fundamental truths to the doctrine of the Trinity. The fundamental truths can be summarized by the following three statements:

- God is three distinct persons  
Ge 1:26, 27, Matt 3:16-17
  - In Genesis, and in fact in the first chapter of Genesis, we already have an indication of plurality of persons in God himself.
  - Each person is distinct
  - Three members of the Trinity performing three distinct activities.
  - God the Father is speaking from Heaven, God the Son is being baptized and is spoken to from God the Father and God the Spirit is descending from Heaven resting upon Jesus.
  
- Each person is fully God  
Jn 1:1, Heb 1:3, Acts 5:3-4
  - Echoes the beginning of Genesis 1:1, - implies before creation, was not created
  - Jesus is “the Word”, and he was “with God”, and he “was God”
  - Exact representation (Gk. Character, “exact duplicate”) of the nature or being (Gk. Hypostasis) of God in every way.
  - Every attribute that God has so does the Son.
  - The Holy Spirit is personal – He can be lied to.
  - Holy Spirit is God
  
- There is one God  
Mk 12:29
  - There is one God

1. Scripture teaches us that God is three persons, yet scripture also very clearly teaches us that there is only one God. Are these two teachings in contradiction to one another?

- No there is no contradiction
- A contradiction would be if the Bible said “God is three persons and God is not three persons”, or “There is one God and there is not one God”
- But to say that “God is three persons and there is one God” is not a contradiction.
- R.C.Sproul uses the example of Charles Dickens famous line in A Tale of Two Cities: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” This is obviously a contradiction if Dickens means that it was the best of times in the same way that it was the worst of times. However, it is not a contradiction as Dickens means it was the best of times in one sense and the worst of times in another.
- Scripture clearly teaches both. How the two truths are reconciled together is something that we as finite creatures do not understand and is therefore a mystery.
- God is one and he is also three at the same time, but not in the same way.
- God is one in being (essence) and three in persons.
- Deut 29:29 – “The secret things belong to the Lord our God...”

2. The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith as it helps shape our understanding of other key doctrines. A misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity will lead to a misunderstanding of other doctrines that will ultimately undermine who God is and what we as Christians believe in. What implications would there be if we were to deny any one of the three statements?

- What happens if we were to deny the fact that God is three distinct persons?
  - o Modalism – that God exists in three different forms/modes
  - o I.e. God appeared as the Father in the OT, the Son in the NT, and the Spirit after Pentecost
  - o There would be no interpersonal relationship
  - o It would be hard to see how God could be genuinely personal
  - o That God would be in need of creation to relate to
  - o If there is no relationship, then how could God love
  - o God’s attribute of independence would be challenged as he would now be dependent on creation for relationships
  
- What happens if we were to deny the fact that each person is fully God?
  - o Arianism – denies the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit
    - Arianism
      - Taught that God the Son was at one point created by God the Father
      - That the Son is a heavenly being who existed before creation and is far greater than all of creation, he is still not equal to the Father in all attributes.
      - States that the Son is similar to Father but not the same
      - Jehovah Witnesses are the modern day Arians
    - Subordinationism
      - Believes that the Son was eternal (not created) and divine, but still not equal to the Father
      - The Son is inferior to the Father
      - Subordinationism should not be confused with the doctrine that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in role or function. – We will discuss in a later question
    - Adoptionism
      - Jesus was an ordinary man until his baptism, where God “adopted” Jesus as his “Son” and gave him supernatural powers.
      - Jesus did not exist before he was born

- Jesus was not divine in nature, but only an exalted man whom God called “Son”
    - If Christ was merely a created being or not fully God, it would be hard to see how he would be able to bear the full wrath of God for all our sins
    - There would be doubt in whether we could fully trust him to save us completely
    - If Christ is not the infinite God, could we really pray to him? How would he hear and answer all the prayers for all people if he were not infinite, omniscient
      - This is an argument against prayers to the saints or to Mary that the Catholic faith practices
    - If Jesus was not fully God, then it would be idolatry to worship him, yet the new testament commands us to do so
    - If Jesus was created, yet still saved us all, this would attribute salvation to a creature and not to God himself, thereby wrongly exalting the creature over the creator
  - What happens if we were to deny the fact that there is one God?
    - Tritheism/Pluralism – There are three Gods or there are many Gods
    - Where would a believer’s loyalties, devotion, or worship lie? There would be no absolute.
    - Which God should we choose?
    - There would be no unity in God, but plurality
    - Each God may have different purposes and motives
3. Many analogies have been used to try to explain the Trinity. Analogies such as water, an egg, or human experience are some common examples. Although analogies may be helpful to try and understand the concept of the Trinity, they all turn out to be inadequate and even misleading upon further thought. Recall some of the analogies that were discussed in your group in the previous study and see how they fall short of explaining the doctrine of the Trinity.
- a. Human experience (father, son, brother)
    - i. These deny that there are three distinct persons as there is only one person acting in different modes
  - b. Three leaf clover, parts of a tree (roots, trunk, branches), Time (past, present, future), Egg (white, yolk, shell), Family (husband, wife, child), Water (steam, liquid, ice)
    - i. These deny that that each person is fully God
    - ii. i.e. Three leaf clover has three leaves, but each leaf is not the full clover
    - iii. I.e. Even at the triple point for water, where steam, liquid water, and ice can exist simultaneously, the quantity of steam is not liquid or ice, and the quantity of liquid is not steam or ice, etc...They each have different properties or characteristics
  - c. Water (steam, liquid, ice)
    - i. Denies there is one God as there is no such things as “one water”
4. Scripture teaches us that each person is fully God, and that each person fully shares in all the attributes of God. So God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are equally wise. They are equally powerful and equally loving. The only distinctions between the persons of the Trinity are how they relate to each other and to creation. It is in those relationships that they carry out different roles. As a quick survey, how do the following passages speak to the different roles of each person of the Trinity?
- Jn 6:44 and 1 Jn 4:14, Jn 3:16
- Father Sent the Son, the Son did not send the Father
  - The Father gave his Son – more of a sense of sacrifice
  - The Son went, he obeyed
- 1 Peter 2:24 and Eph 1:7
- Jesus performs redemptive work by bearing our sins on the cross, so that through Him we light live
- Jn 14:26 and Jn 15:26
- The Holy Spirit is the Counselor
  - Father and Son send the Holy Spirit
- Ac 1:8, Ro 8:13
- Ac 1:8 – The Holy Spirit empowers us for God’s service
  - Ro 8:13 – The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, by whose power we are able to put aside the sinful nature
5. As can be seen by the preceding verses, there are different roles within the Trinity. The different roles also signify that there is a subordination among the persons of the Trinity, **but only in role**. It is important to distinguish the difference between “economic subordination”, or subordinate in role, with the heresy of subordinationism. Subordinationism holds that the Son and Holy Spirit are inferior in being to the Father, but being subordinate in role does not imply inferiority as we have already established that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all fully God and are equal in being. What do the following passages teach us about the ordering of the persons of the Trinity with respect to their role or function?
- 1 Cor 11:3, Jn 20:21
- 1 Cor – “the head of Christ is God”
  - Jn 20:21 – “the Father has sent me”
  - Seen as the leader of the Trinity
- Jn 6:38
- Jesus **willingly** subjects himself to the will of the Father

Jn 14:28

- "the Father is greater than I" – not in essence or worth, but in role

Jn 14:26, Jn 15:26, Jn. 16:13-15

- Both God the Father and God the Son send forth the Holy Spirit
- Analogous to the Father sending the Son showing that the Father leads and the Son obeys, that the Son subjects himself to the Father, we can apply that to this passage as both God the Father and God the Son send the Holy Spirit, thereby showing that the Holy Spirit is subordinate in role to the Father and the Son
- The Holy Spirit speaks what he hears from the Son and the Father
- Scripture never says that the Spirit sent the Father or the Son

6. One of the divine incommunicable attributes of God is that He is immutable or unchanging. Malachi 3:6 says "I the Lord do not change". This necessitates the fact that God has existed and will continue to exist eternally as the Trinity. How do the following passages support the eternal existence of the Trinity?

Ge 1:1-2, Jn 1:1-2 and Jn 17:5

- The Son and the Holy Spirit existed before creation
- The Son shared in the glory of God before the world began

Jn 1:3 and Heb 1:2

- The Father created the universe through the Son
- Speaks to the role of the Son obeying as everything was created through the Son

Jn 3:16-17, Eph 1:3-4, Gal 4:4

- The fact that God the Father gave His Son (v.16) or sent His Son (v.17) indicates a Father-Son relationship before Christ came into the world
- Before time began, the Father and the Son had planned salvation – "chose us in him before the creation of the world"
- Speaks to the role of the Father in choosing and the Son obeying
- The Son did not become the Son when the Father sent him.

1 Cor 15:27-28

- All things will be subject to God the Son, but God the Son will be made subject to God the Father
- Speaks to the roles of God the Son and God the Father in eternity future

The Father has always been the Father. The Son has always been the Son. The Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit. This is not only with regards to the distinct persons, but also with regards to their roles. The Trinity would cease to exist if there was no distinction in roles among the persons. For if there is no difference in the way the three persons relate to each other there will no longer be three distinct persons, and therefore no Trinity.

The one and only God exists as three distinct eternal persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of whom are fully equal in all their attributes and nature, but differ in how they relate to each other and to creation. Knowing that we are relating to a tri-personal God should draw us into deeper fellowship with God in our times of prayer and worship. In your times of prayer this week, consider how you are interacting with the three persons of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed knowable but will never be completely understood by the finite. For how can a finite creature fully comprehend an omniscient eternal God? This should not hinder us, but on the contrary, it should cause us to worship God all the more.