

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 3a The Doctrine of the Trinity, Part 1

Presented by the



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Hello and welcome to Unit 3. In this unit, we are going to explore the nature of the Trinity. Now, in the first unit, we explored some of the attributes of God and talked about the unity of God and the fact that he can't be divided. But we did touch on the fact that there is a Trinity, this idea of a God who is three in one. In any overview of systematic theology, it is critical to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. It is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. The subject of the Trinity is holy ground because it discusses the nature of the one true God. Consequently, we should approach this subject with all humility and reverence.

At the outset, it is important to state that any belief about the Trinity must come from the Bible and the Bible alone. It is only that authoritative source that can be used to discover answers about God and his nature. The Bible, by itself, must answer the question as to whether or not there is such a thing as the Trinity. Traditions or the pronouncements of some church authority do not make the doctrine true. In addition, the doctrine of the Trinity can only be known by divine revelation. It cannot be known by human reason. The only way in which the inner working of God can be known is that God revealed it to humanity. The Bible says that the mind of the Lord is unknown to humanity. In Corinthians, we read, "For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ." [1Co 2:16] So the Trinity is a doctrine that God has revealed to humankind through the Scriptures. And this is really important. It is not and cannot be the result of human reasoning.

The doctrine of the Trinity, simply stated, is as follows. The Bible teaches that there is one eternal God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is the only God that exists. However, within the nature of this one God are three persons or three centers of consciousness: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are co-equal and co-eternal. They are also distinguishable or distinct from one another. These three distinct persons are the one God. Everything that is true about God is true about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now, an interesting concept as we study the Trinity is that the reverse is not true. While the Bible teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, it is wrong to say that God is the Father or God is the Son or God is the Spirit. God's nature consists of three distinct persons. Therefore, it is incorrect to limit God to one particular member of the Trinity. It is a confusing subject, I know. Some theologians spend their lifetime trying to study and explain the Trinity.

In this course, we are just going to touch the surface of this doctrine. So let's apply some system to this study of theology and explore the following points about the nature of God.

First, there is only one God that exists. We have discussed this in the last unit, but foundational to the doctrine of the Trinity is the biblical teaching of the existence of only one God. No other divine being has real existence. Trinitarians, or those who believe in the Trinity, are emphatic that only one God exists. Furthermore, the essence of God cannot be divided. God, by nature, is spirit. He has no physical form. It is not possible to divide up spirit. The God of the Bible is one single, eternal, infinite being who is indivisible, impossible to divide.

Second point: There are three distinct persons who exist: the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Scripture is clear that in God there are three distinct persons who exist: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. For example, Jesus, when he was on earth, prayed to God the Father. He did not pray to himself. At his baptism, the voice of the Father spoke in an approving way of Jesus. It was not Jesus who spoke of himself. Therefore, the three persons should not be confused with one another.

Third point: Each of these three persons is called God. And if we need to point it out again, they are called God because they are God. The Bible teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Each are called God. Each possesses attributes that only God can possess. And each performs work that only God can perform.

Fourth point: The three persons are the one God. This is the Trinity. The conclusion to the above facts is as follows. If only one God exists, and if there are three distinct persons who are all called God, then the three persons must be the one God. This is the doctrine of the Trinity.

So to summarize thus far, there is only one God that exists. There are three distinct persons who exist. Each of the persons who exist are called God. And the three persons together are the one God. Now, if you are like me, this is not making much sense. How can three persons be three persons and one person at the same time? So obviously there is some much-needed clarification that should be made about the Trinity. So let's go over this one by one.

First, the members of the Trinity have distinct roles. Although they are all equally God, they have different functions within the Godhead. The Father is the one who sent the Son, while the Son is the one who was sent. The Holy Spirit is also sent to testify of Jesus. Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal with God the Father in nature. However, they are subordinate in their relationships. Subordinate in a relationship, by the way, does not mean lesser in character.

Second, all three persons of the Trinity are of equal importance. Christians often overlook the importance of Father and the Holy Spirit because Jesus the Son is where the faith centers on. He is the one who became a human being, suffered for the sins of humanity, and rose from the dead. He is the one who will return to the earth and set up his kingdom. Eternal life is based on how we view Christ. Consequently, Jesus Christ is central to the heart of the believer and central to Christianity. However, we must realize that each member of the Trinity is of equal importance. They are equal of dignity, majesty, glory, and power, but different in roles in which they play.

And finally, the idea of three centers of consciousness or three distinct personalities has no analogy for us as humans. All attempts to acquaint the Trinity with some sort of analogy will miserably fail. This includes trying to compare the Trinity to a human being who has intellect, feeling, and will. This is not the same as the triune God who has three distinct centers of consciousness. Therefore, it is best to admit that the Trinity has no analogy with which we can compare it. The truth of the Trinity must be decided solely on what the Bible has to say about the subject. The doctrine of the Trinity can only be known by divine revelation. Human reasoning cannot discover anything about the personal nature of God. Human reasoning can discover that there is a God, but not anything further about the personal nature of God.

When we look at what the Scripture has to say, we discover that one God exists in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is found by noting the following points. Only one God exists. There are three distinct persons in the New Testament: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these three distinct persons is called God. Therefore, the three distinct persons must be the one God. The members of the Trinity have different roles, though they are equal in character. Each member of the Trinity is equally important, although Christians tend to emphasize Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. There is no real analogy to the Trinity to which humans can compare the Trinity.

To further delve into this concept of what the Trinity is, let's look at what the Trinity isn't. There are a number of common misconceptions about the doctrine of the Trinity that need to be addressed. These misconceptions are as follows. Misconception number one: The Trinity is a pagan idea adopted by Christians. It is often charged that the doctrine of the Trinity is a pagan idea that the church adopted in its early days. This is categorically not true on a number of levels.

A) The Trinity is derived from Scripture, not from some pagan religion or some other false doctrine. The source of the teaching of the Trinity is from the Bible itself. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to explain what God has revealed to us in his word. It comes solely from the Bible. B) While some Christians have made comparisons of the Trinity to pagan beliefs, the Bible does no such thing. The Trinity is strictly a biblical doctrine. There are those who attempt to compare the Trinity with teachings in other religions, and they either do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity or what the other religions teach about the nature of God. C) There is the matter of which source supposedly influenced the Trinity. Candidates such as the religions of ancient Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria have been mentioned in various teachings, as have eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Yet these religions are radically different from one another in their beliefs, let alone their difference from Christianity. D) The fact that there were a number of ancient religions that worshiped three gods is irrelevant. These gods were separate gods, not one God as in the Trinity. Furthermore, the three gods worshiped in these cultures were usually the chief gods among many. There were many other gods these people worshiped apart from the chief ones. The similarity of the number three proves nothing with respect to derivation or influence. The supposed derivations of the Trinity from pagan concepts come either too early or too late in history or are too far away geographically. For example, comparison to the worship of three gods in Egypt and Babylonia will not work. These gods were worshiped 2000 years before Christ came. India, where Buddhism and Hinduism arose, are too far removed geographically. There simply are no credible sources where the doctrine could have come from.

Finally, there is a logical fallacy involved. The fact that some ancient religions may have had some similar beliefs to the Trinity does not mean they are the same or that the Trinity was influenced by them. Similarity does not mean the same. Therefore, the idea that the Trinity was somehow influenced, derived from, or borrowed from pagan concepts does not fit the facts.

So the first misconception is that the Trinity came from some pagan idea adopted by the biblical authors. That is not correct.

Misconception number two is that the Trinity doctrine is a mystery that is impossible to understand. Now, difficult? Yes. Will we understand it in its entirety? No. But we can understand the concept of the Trinity. When the Trinity is referred to as a mystery in Scripture, it is a mystery in the biblical sense of the term, that is, a sacred secret. A mystery in the Bible does not mean something that cannot be understood. A mystery is something that was previously unknown but now revealed. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” [Col 1:27]

The truth about the Gentiles being part of the church, the body of Christ, was something that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. The mystery was unveiled during the New Testament period. Having said that, it does not mean that humankind can comprehend everything about the Trinity. Our natural faculties cannot comprehend how there can be three and how there can be one and they can be the same. The doctrine of the Trinity is, as we have said, difficult to understand. It is impossible to find human terms that would completely express how God is able to be both a unity and three distinct persons at the same time. However, there are many facts that we as humans are not able to fully understand. The Trinity is one of those things we must accept by faith because the Scripture teaches it. It should not be rejected because some find it difficult to comprehend. A basic understanding of the Trinity is certainly possible. Therefore, it is imprecise to say that the Trinity is impossible to understand. Humans can understand many things about the Trinity without having a complete understanding.