

Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology

Class 15: The Doctrine of God, part 11

The Trinity

"... this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

John 17.3

I. What the Trinity is (& isn't)

A. What the Trinity is

*"Now this is the catholic faith: That we worship one God in trinity & the trinity in unity, **neither blending their persons, nor dividing their essence.** For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit, still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal."*

Athanasian Creed

Two key terms: Essence & Persons

1. **Essence** = "God-ness". All three Persons of the Trinity share the same essence, or "God-ness." One is not more God than another. None is more divine than the rest.
2. **Person** = "a particular individual distinct from the others." Our God is three distinct beings that are equally and uniquely God.

The Persons of the Trinity are not 3 gods; rather, they dwell in communion with each other as they each "subsist in the divine nature without being compounded or confused".

B. What the Trinity is not

1. We reject **monarchianism** = there is only one person (mono), and the Son and the Spirit subsist in the divine essence as impersonal attributes and not distinct and divine Persons.
2. We reject **modalism** = the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are different names for the same God acting in different roles or manifestations (like the well-intentioned but misguided "water, vapor, ice" analogy).
3. We reject **Arianism** = Christ was not fully God.
4. We reject **Macedonianism** = The Holy Spirit is not a fully divine person.
5. We reject **tri-theism** = the three members of the Godhead are, to quote Mormonism, "three distinct Beings, three separate Gods."



II. Why The Doctrine of the Trinity Matters

Religion is a totalitarian belief. It is the wish to be a slave. It is the desire that there be an unalterable, unchallengeable, tyrannical authority who can convict you of thought crime while you are asleep, who can subject you to total surveillance around the clock every waking and sleeping minute of your life, before you're born and, even worse and where the real fun begins, after you're dead. A celestial North Korea. Who wants this to be true? Who but a slave desires such a ghastly fate? I've been to North Korea. It has a dead man as its president, Kim Jong-Il is only head of the party and head of the army. He's not head of the state. That office belongs to his deceased father, Kim Il-Sung. It's one short of a trinity I might add. The son is the reincarnation of the father. It is the most revolting and utter and absolute and heartless tyranny the human species has ever evolved. But at least you can die and leave North Korea!"

Christopher Hitchens, God is Not Great; How Religion Poisons Everything

A. The doctrine of the Trinity matters for Truth

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3.16-17

B. The doctrine of the Trinity matters for Creation

*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.**"*

John 17. 24-26

One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures, whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over.

CS Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

C. The doctrine of the Trinity matters for Mission

1. Islam – unity with no diversity
2. Paganism – diversity with no unity

D. The doctrine of the Trinity matters for Relationships/community

Helpful Biblical References re: The Trinity

The Trinity exists in 3 persons

1. Isaiah 48:16

Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there." And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit.

2. Matthew 3:16–17

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

3. Matthew 28:19

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.

The Father is God

4. John 6:27

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.

5. Romans 1:7

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

6. 1 Peter 1:1–2

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

The Son is God

7. John 1:14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was 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.

8. Romans 9:5

To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

9. Colossians 2:9

For in him [Jesus] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

10. Hebrews 1:8

But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

11. 1 John 5:20

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

The Holy Spirit is God

12. Acts 5:3-4

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."

13. 1 Corinthians 3:16

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

There is only one God

14. Isaiah 44:6

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."

15. 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.

16. Galatians 3:20

Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

17. 1 Timothy 2:5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.