

**“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”
—Ephesians 4:4–6 (NASB)**

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” —2 Corinthians 13:14 (NASB)

In His powerful rebuke of the southern kingdom of Judah, Yahweh asks a fundamental question through the prophet Isaiah: **“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?”** (Isa 40:18). The spiritual degradation of Judah in the seventh century BC manifested itself in the people’s contentment with little gods—with gods imagined according to man’s likeness and depicted by man’s artistry. Their idols represented deities that were too small, too comprehensible, too relatable to man and his existence. The cure for all their maladies would be found only in a return to the incomparable One.

Indeed, the only true God is one who is incomparable. His essence cannot be depicted by any image or contained in any analogy because He is incomprehensible. This incomprehensibility is nowhere better seen than in the doctrine of God’s *triunity*. Try as one may, any effort to picture the triune Godhead leads only to error. Its logic exceeds our rational capacity. But although we do not know *how* God is triune, He has nonetheless condescended to our level to explain *that* He is triune. He has given us the knowledge we need to worship Him as three-in-one, and to reject this truth about Him is to reject Him in totality.

I. Definition of “Divine Triunity”

A. What *triunity* means.

The triunity of God refers to His *three-in-oneness*. God is eternally *one in essence* but *three in persons*.

Thus, there is in God both *singularity* and *plurality*—*unity* and *distinction*. The Bible unequivocally teaches that there is *one* God—not three. **This singularity describes what theologians call the *essence, substance, or nature* of God.** He is one. But the Bible also teaches that this divine essence is possessed wholly and equally by three—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. **This plurality relates to *persons*.**

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each equally and eternally God, possessing the divine nature without differentiation or alteration. One is never lesser and another greater. At the same

time, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another in person, and thus distinct in how they interact with creation and distinct in how we identify their workings (particularly with respect to the design, accomplishment, and application of redemption, as displayed in Ephesians 1:3–14).

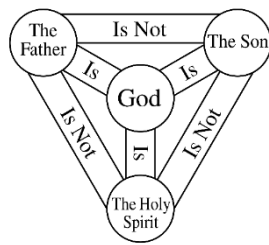
KEY CONCEPTS OF GOD’S THREE-IN-ONENESS		
“Essence”	One	Singularity, Unity
“Person”	Three	Plurality, Distinction

Augustine (AD 354-430) described the relationship between God’s essence and His persons this way:

There is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit—each one of these is God, and all of them together are one God; each of these are a full substance and all together are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit, the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but the Father is purely the Father, the Son purely the Son, and the Holy Spirit purely the Holy Spirit. These three have the same eternal nature, the same unchangeableness, the same majesty, the same power. (*On Christian Doctrine*, 1.11–12)

Such a summation of biblical teaching concerning God’s triunity can be expressed also by this diagram:

This diagram does not picture God's triunity, for no picture or analogy can do that, but it does help to express primary assertions that are derived from God's Word about God's essence and His persons.



- There is one God—one divine essence.
- Each of the persons of the divine essence are truly God:
 - The Father is God.
 - The Son is God.
 - The Spirit is God.
- But each of the persons of the divine essence are necessarily distinguished:
 - The Father is not the Son or the Spirit.
 - The Son is not the Father or the Spirit.
 - The Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

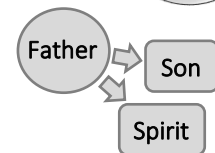
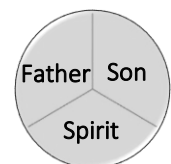
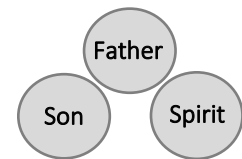
To summarize this foundational truth, early Latin-speaking Christians began to use the word *trinitas*, which is made up of the Latin word *trini* (three or threefold) and the suffix *-tas*, which is used to indicate a state of being. In other words, *trinitas* (from which we derive “trinity”) means “**a threefold state of being.**”

Historians suggest it was the early church theologian **Tertullian** (AD 155–230) who first utilized the term “trinity.” In his defense of the Christian faith against growing threats of heresy, Tertullian used the term as the appropriate catchword that summarized the Bible’s teaching on God’s character—one of the teachings that was most under attack in the early centuries of the church’s existence.

B. What *trinity* does not mean.

The biblical teaching on the triunity of God must be carefully distinguished from misunderstandings and corruptions of this teaching that have arisen over the centuries. Four kinds of error deserve special notice:

1. That God is triune does not mean that there are three gods. This is the view of **tritheism**. Tritheism errs in that it sees distinction not merely between the divine persons, but in the divine essence.
2. That God is triune does not mean that God merely manifests Himself in three ways—sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Spirit. This is the view of **modalism** (ancient Sabellianism; modern day Oneness Pentecostalism), which contends that God uses different “modes” to manifest Himself to His creation. This is the error that is evident in likening God to H₂O and its ability to exist in three states: ice, water, or vapor. The problem is that these states do not exist simultaneously, whereas God is simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. That God is triune does not mean that the divine essence has three “parts”—one part consisting of Father, one of the Son, and one of the Spirit. This view is sometimes called **partialism**, and its error is evident in the analogy likening God to an egg: the Father (egg shell); the Son (egg yolk); the Spirit (egg white).
4. That God is triune does not mean that there is a hierarchy in which the Father creates two lesser “gods”—the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the view of **Arianism**, a heresy taught by an early church theologian by the name of *Arius* (AD 250-336) and believed today by Jehovah’s Witnesses.



In light of the ease at which one can fall into these heresies, Herman Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.288–289) writes, “The great challenge facing us with this dogma [the Trinity] is to see to it that the unity of the divine essence does not cancel out the Trinity of the persons or, conversely, that the Trinity of persons does not abolish the unity of the divine essence. There is always the threat of deviation either to the right or to the left and of falling either into the error of Sabellius or that of Arius.”

QUESTION: Are there more Gods than one? **ANSWER:** There is but one only, the living and true God.
QUESTION: How many persons are there in the Godhead? **ANSWER:** There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. — *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Questions 5 & 6

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Trinity

Our knowledge of the triunity of God does not originate with a church creed, a religious tradition, a logical syllogism, or a philosophical deduction. **We believe in the triune nature of God because He has revealed it in His Word**, and this Word is inherently clear, singularly inerrant, perfectly sufficient for revealing, explaining, and distinguishing truth about God, and binding in its authority. Moreover, this teaching is not downplayed in obscure wording of the Bible or coaxed out of the white spaces on its pages. It is something God wants us to know about Him, and He has taken care to reveal it in an undeniable manner.

True, the Bible does not use the words “trinity” or “triunity.” Nor is there a specific biblical text which concisely defines the concept of the trinity for us. But this is not a weakness. Because of its beauty and profundity, knowledge of the triune God is revealed gradually in Scripture—simply at first, but with increasing detail as revelation progresses through time. It is a truth that is also developed as the necessary consequence of other truths (particularly those dealing with redemption). As these other truths are themselves progressively revealed, so is the doctrine of the trinity.

Ultimately, we must recognize that for a doctrine to be true does not require that it be stated in a way that is convenient for us. In His infinite wisdom, God has chosen the most perfect way to reveal His triunity—and that is through a revelation made up of diverse kinds of literature written by writers of diverse styles who were chosen and superintended by Him over a period of hundreds of years.

Thus, the evidence for the doctrine of the trinity is so clear that for someone today to *reject it* immediately marks him as a non-Christian. A regenerate believer may not be able to explain the doctrine of the trinity well—and may even explain it incorrectly. But if a person rejects the doctrine when it is presented to him carefully and biblically, it is safe to conclude he is not a believer.

Justification for belief in the doctrine of the trinity is established in four important propositions:

A. **Singularity**—The Bible teaches that there is *one divine essence*:

- Genesis 1:1; Exodus 20:2–3; Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 5:7; 6:4; 32:39; Psalm 86:10; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5–7, 21–22; 46:9; Zechariah 14:9; etc.
- Mark 12:28–34; John 17:3; Acts 17:22–29; Romans 3:30; 1 Corinthians 8:4; James 2:19; etc.

B. **Plurality**—The Bible teaches that there is in God *a plurality of persons*:

- Genesis 1:1–2, 26; 3:22; 11:7; Psalm 2:7, 12; Psalm 51:11; 110:1; Isaiah 42:1; 63:10–11; etc.
- Matthew 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; John 1:1–3; 14:26; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Romans 8:26–27; 15:30; Galatians 4:4–6; Ephesians 3:14–17; 4:4–6; Titus 3:4–6; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Peter 1:1–2; etc.

C. **Deity**—The Bible teaches that all three persons possess *the divine perfections*:

- The deity of the Son: John 1:1, 18; 5:17–18; 8:58; 20:28; Romans 10:9–13; Philippians 2:6–7; Colossians 1:15; 2:9; Titus 2:13–14; Hebrews 1:3, 7–8; Revelation 1:17; etc.
- The deity of the Spirit: Matthew 12:31–32; John 14:16–17, 26; 16:7–8; Acts 5:3–4; 13:2, 4; 1 Corinthians 2:11; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 3:7–11; 9:14; 10:29; etc.

D. **Unity**—The Bible teaches that all three persons are *of one essence*:

- Matthew 28:19; John 10:30–31, 38; 14:9–11; 17:21; Acts 16:6–7; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 8:4–6; 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18; etc.

When taken together, these four categories of biblical testimony—singularity, plurality, deity, and unity—form the foundation to the doctrine of the trinity.

“Based on biblical evidence, the unprejudiced mind cannot doubt the existence of a plurality of persons in the Godhead without impugning the clarity, the inerrancy, and the inspiration of the Scriptures. Any accurate discussion of the Trinity must begin and end with what the Bible declares.”

—John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 236

III. What Triunity Demands from Us

- A. **Embrace the doctrine of the trinity by faith.** The doctrine of the trinity is one of the most striking aspects of the incomprehensibility of God (cf. Isaiah 40:18, 25; 44:8; 46:5). We trust in God as God not because we can figure Him out and fit Him in our minds, but because we *cannot*. God’s word often tells us only the “that” but not the “how.” This certainly applies to the doctrine of the trinity. It is embraced by believing God’s revelation of Himself in His word as true, even though we cannot find parallels in our own existence.
- B. **Marvel at the profundity of the Godhead.** Let this doctrine carry you to its rightful destination: *adoration for the magnificence of God*. As J. Gresham Machen states, “That doctrine [of the trinity] is a mystery. No human mind can fathom it. Yet what a blessed mystery it is! The Christian’s heart melts within him in gratitude and joy when he thinks of the divine love and condescension that has thus lifted the veil and allowed us sinful creatures a look into the very depths of the being of God.”
- C. **Prioritize your relationships.** Notice how the Apostle Paul brings out this correlation. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul delivers this practical admonition for church unity: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling . . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1–3). But he doesn’t stop there. He immediately identifies the doctrinal basis for this exhortation by tying it to the reality of the trinity: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4–6). The doctrine of the trinity reminds us that healthy relationships are fundamental to orthodox Christianity.

For Further Study

Memorize: Deuteronomy 6:4; 2 Corinthians 13:14

Sing: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (*Hymns of Grace* #48); “Come, Thou Almighty King” (*Hymns of Grace* #326)

Pray: Praise God that He is incomparable to anything else that exists, and that this Incomparable One has shown His love and grace to you. Thank each of the persons of the Godhead for their particular work in your redemption. Adore God for the indescribable beauty and majesty manifest in His triunity.

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God’s “triunity.” Emphasize the difference between essence and person.
- 2) Review section I.B. above, “What triunity does not mean.” Be able to describe each of the four categorical errors made when attempting to summarize the biblical teaching on the trinity. Be sure to note the fatal flaw of each view.
- 3) Why is the doctrine of the trinity a teaching we must accept *by faith*? Why does this *not* mean that we must consider this doctrine as *irrational* or *contradictory*?
- 4) Explain how the doctrine of the trinity deepens your adoration for God?
- 5) Meditate on Ephesians 4:1–6. Based on the teaching of God’s triunity in vv. 4–6, prayerfully consider which relationships need your investment and sacrifice to implement the admonition of vv. 1–3.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 16 – “Sovereignty”