

Essentials of Christianity (pt 12)
5/9/2010

Introduction _____

Good morning brethren! Today is going to be an exciting day as we begin our next category contained within the subject of **theology: the doctrine of God.**

Today we'll begin to talk about one of the great marvels of biblical revelation: **The Doctrine of the Trinity.**

God as Trinity

This is one of those subjects that is so vast, so profound, so glorious, that I feel slightly overwhelmed at the task of being the one who has to present the material.

Volumes have been written on the subject. Our coverage of this will merely be a drop in the bucket compared to how thoroughly the subject has been covered throughout the history of the church.

But it is necessary for us to dig into this for the sake of learning it anew or just to re-familiarize ourselves with these truths.

It is absolutely essential that every Christian, every family, every church and every generation of Christianity take the time to frequently immerse themselves in the knowledge of the Trinity, because **it defines who God is.**

The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to the Christian faith; belief or disbelief in the Trinity marks orthodoxy from unorthodoxy.¹

A religious sect may be able to hide behind a belief in monotheism (like Islam), but the doctrine of the Trinity separates the wheat from the chaff, as does the doctrine of salvation (which we'll get to later on).

Before we look at some passages and define what the Trinity is, let's begin with some preliminary remarks.

Question: why should we devote the time and effort to learn about the Trinity?

1. (*what I stated already*). Because it is essential to the Christian faith. To remove this doctrine causes the Christian faith to disintegrate.

If someone does not embrace a belief in the Triune God they do not believe in the God of the Bible.

A few years ago emergent church advocate Rob Bell perhaps thought he was doing Christianity a favor by lightening the load of what he seems to perceive as the church being weighed down with.

In his book “**Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith, Rob Bell**” brings to the table some startling comments about doctrine, in what he believes is an attempt to make Jesus more *accessible to the common man*.

¹ Paul P Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, Chicago, 1989).

Bell argues that the doctrines of Christianity should be thought of as the "springs" that hold up the trampoline on which we jump and live in Christ. The springs are not the main point; they merely facilitate the greater goal of "us finding our lives in God."

Now that analogy has some truth to it. But it's also more dangerous than it might first appear.

Conceiving of Christian doctrines as springs allows Bell to say that getting the doctrines right is not really that important. If you don't like one or two of the springs, you can just take them out of the trampoline and keep on jumping.

Here is Bell's take on the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance: "It is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it. It was added later. We can take it out and examine it. Discuss it, probe it, question it. It flexes, and it stretches."

Bell affirms his belief in the Trinity, but he also says he wants to carve out some room to "question" those doctrines.

He would say *"if we make them any more than springs, then they become bricks that build walls that enslave people and cause division."*²

Mr. Bell has gone down a very slippery slope that could lead to apostasy for himself unless he repents.

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2. (learning about the Trinity) Helps us to rightfully defend the doctrine and protect us from error.

3. Worship of the true and living God consciously acknowledges the relationship and roles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

4. The Christians growth and Christlikeness (or sanctification) is rightly understood and enriched when seen as the work of the Triune God.

Consequently, the doctrine of the Trinity provides one of the most important and neglected patterns for how human life and relationships are to be conducted.³

I'm sure if we thought hard enough we could think of other reasons.

Let's turn in our bibles to **Matthew 28:18-20: read**

^{NAU} Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Here we have one of the clearest Trinitarian references in the Bible.

³ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005).

In case someone here doesn't know, the Trinity refers to God the Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit.

Before we present a definition of the Trinity, it is important to point out that we face a real difficulty right at the start: *language itself*.

Throughout this study I'll be using some quotes from a variety of sources because I liked some of the explanations. Where the quotes came from will be in the footnotes of the sermon notes.

Christians have struggled for centuries to express, within the limitations of human language, the unique revelation God makes of His mode of existence. We struggle because language is a finite means of communication. Finite minds are trying to express in words infinite truths. At times we simply cannot "say" what we need to say to adequately express the grandeur that is our God.

Humans communicate by means of examples. When little children start asking the endless series of questions that suggest themselves to little minds, we often find ourselves using analogies and examples in our replies. When asked what a new food tastes like, we compare it to known foods in the child's life. We might say, "It tastes a little bit like crackers with honey on them," knowing the child has had crackers with honey. That may not be exactly what it tastes like, but they get the idea. As their "database" of knowledge grows, so we can expand our analogies. We never escape this element of our language. When we encounter new thoughts, new ideas, it is natural for us to fit them into preexisting categories by comparing them with past experiences or facts.

This process works just fine for most things. But for unique things, it doesn't. If something is truly unique, it cannot be compared to anything else, at least not without introducing some element of error. One might be able to draw a parallel to a certain aspect of the truly unique thing, but if it's really unique, the analogy will be limited, and, if pressed too

far, downright erroneous. But since we don't encounter too many completely unique things in our lives, we manage to get along.

The problem is, of course, God is completely unique. He is God, and there is no other. He is totally unlike anything else, and as He frequently reminds us, "To whom then will you liken Me?" (Isa 40:25). There is no answer to that question, because to compare God to anything in the created order is, in the final analysis, to deny His uniqueness. When we say, "God is like ..." we are treading on dangerous ground. Yes, we might be able to illustrate a certain aspect of God's being in this way, but in every instance the analogy, if pushed far enough, is going to break down.

Our language fails us in other ways as well. First, our language is based upon time. We speak of the past, the present, and the future. But God is not limited to time as we are. Thus, when we speak of Him with our language, we are forced to place misleading limitations upon His being. This often causes real problems for us in discussing His triune nature, for we slip into the all-too-human mode of thinking as time-based, time-limited creatures.

Another way in which our language fails us has to do with how we become attached to the meaning of a word. The way we use the word may cause us to conjure up particular mental images every time we hear it. The most glaring example of this is the word "person," a word that is often used when discussing the Trinity. When we use the word "person," we attach to it all sorts of ideas that comes from our own personal experiences. We think of a physical body, an individual, separate from everyone else. We think of a spatial location, physical attributes like height, weight, age - all things associated with our common use of the word "person." When we use this word to describe a divine person (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit), we tend to limit our understanding because of our common use of the term in everyday life. Many people, upon hearing the word "person" used of the Father, for example, conjure up an image of a kind old grandfatherly figure who is the "person" of the Father. He's separate, different, limited - everything we think of when we think of the term "person." It will be our task (and it is a difficult one!) to labor to separate such "baggage" from our

thinking and use such terms in very specific, limited ways so as to avoid unneeded confusion.⁴

Now let's look at a typical text book description of the Trinity. This is from our web sight. The wording is very specific and very purposeful.

We believe that there is one God, eternally co-existent in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

During the course of this topic we will include **Christology** and **Pneumatology**, since we will spending so much time talking about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Back to the definition.

Let's expand the description a tad.

Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

You would think that a belief that can be expressed in one sentence would be fairly simple as a result, but the fact is this sentence speaks volumes.

As I said, the wording is chosen carefully. Each word is very important, each has a specific function. What is also important is not just the words that were chosen, but also the ones that were avoided.

⁴ White-Trinity

Let's look briefly at some of the major issues presented by this definition. As you can see already, there is a lot packed into each phrase.

First, the doctrine rests completely upon the truth of the first clause: there is only one God. "The one Being that is God" carries within it a tremendous amount of information. It not only asserts that there is only one God (**my notes only: monotheism--which we've already covered**) - but it also insists that God's "Being" is one, unique, undivided, indivisible.

Second, the definition insists that there are three divine persons. Note immediately that we are not saying there are three Beings that are one Being, or three persons that are one person. Such would be self-contradictory. This is to be emphasized because, most often, this is the misrepresentation of the doctrine that is commonly found in the literature of various religions that deny the Trinity. The second clause speaks of three divine persons, not three divine Beings.

As I stated earlier, we must not succumb to the temptation to read the term "person" as if we are talking about finite, self-contained human beings. What "person" means when we speak of the Trinity is quite different than when we speak of creatures such as ourselves.

These divine persons are identified in the last clause as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

One apologist uses the following analogy when speaking of the Trinity that is very helpful:

We need to realize that we are talking about one *what* and three *who's*. The one what is the Being or essence of God; the three who's are the Father, Son, and Spirit. We dare not mix up the what's and who's regarding the Trinity.

Thirdly, we are told that the relationship among these divine persons is eternal. They have eternally existed in this unique relationship. Each of the persons is said to be eternal, each is said to be coequal with the others as to their divine nature. Each fully shares the one Being that is God.

The Father is not 1/3 of God, the Son 1/3 of God, the Spirit 1/3 of God. Each is fully God, coequal with the others, and that eternally. There never was a time when the Father was not the Father; never a time when the Son was not the Son; never a time when the Spirit was not the Spirit. Their relationship is eternal, not in the sense of having been for a long time, but existing, in fact, outside the realm of time itself.

The three foundations of the Trinity, then, are already clearly visible.

Here they are:

Foundation One: Monotheism: There Is Only One God

Foundation Two: There Are Three Divine Persons

Foundation Three: The Persons Are Coequal and Coeternal.⁵

These three foundations not only provide the grounds upon which the Trinity is based, they explain to us why Christians who accept all of the Bible believe this doctrine. This is very important. Often the discussions Christians have with others about the Trinity flounder and go in circles because we do not identify these three truths as biblical teachings. When someone says, "How can you claim to only believe the Bible, when you use terms like 'Trinity' that don't appear in the Bible?" we must be quick to point out that we are forced to do so by the teaching of the Bible itself on these three points. Every error and heresy on this doctrine will find its origin in a denial of one or more of these truths.

⁵ White--Trinity

We will now move on to explain the details of these foundations, excluding the first one: **monotheism**, because the details of that were laid out in our first session on theology.

If you weren't here for that it would be good for you to review that material to prepare you the next two foundations.

Foundation Two: There Are Three Divine Persons. The NT is especially clear on the issue: that there are three persons that are identified as God. But the OT also has allusions to a plurality within the Godhead.

The very first instance of the word "God" in the Bible comes from the Hebrew word Elohim, which is a plural form of God.⁶

The first example where this is made explicit is in **Genesis 1:26-27-- turn to: read.**

^{NAU} Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Who is God referring to using the pronouns "us, our;" the angelic host? NO! This is the Trinity, the Triune God-head, informing us that: **A.** *all three persons are involved in the creation of mankind;* and **B.** *man was created in their image.*

⁶ Paul P Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, Chicago, 1989); Richard Whitaker, *Whitaker's Revised BDB Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Copyright © 1995 Michael S. Bushell, 1995).

What that means exactly is something we'll deal with when we get to anthropology.

These are not the only references in the OT, but that's all we'll look at now.

As we move into the NT, the distinction of the three persons becomes even clearer. This should not surprise us.

Just as the identity of the Messiah is more fully revealed in the NT, so it is true that the persons of the Trinity are most clearly revealed in the NT.

To borrow the quote from Chuck Missler:

The OT is the NT concealed; the NT is the OT revealed.

The doctrine of the Trinity is somewhat veiled in the OT, but is more explicit in the NT.

The persons of the God-head are listed together in the NT in several places. Let's take a look.

Turn to Mat 3:16-17; 1Co 12:4-6; 2Co 13:14; Eph 4:4-6.

^{NAU} Matthew 3:16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him,

¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.

⁶ *There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.*

^{NAU} *2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.*

^{NAU} *Ephesians 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;*

⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*

⁶ *one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

All these passages are trinitarian passages. They lay out for us, uniformly, all three persons of the God-head, relating to the roles they have. That's a topic we'll deal with later.

These passages, along with numerous others, give us glimpses into the way the members of the God-head interact with each other.

This foundation in trinitarian theology is crucial not only for what it affirms (there are three persons that co-exist), but also because for what it denies.

We'll close with this.

Tri-theism. In early church history certain men taught a grave error by abandoning the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.

Tri-theism is simply polytheistic. And we've already established the fact that there's only ONE God.

Another ancient heresy developed.

Sabellianism or Modalism. This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. a.d. 200), erred in the opposite from that of Tri-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. The teaching is thus also known as modalism because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁷

In other words the members of the God-head are not **co-existent**.

A modern adherent to this theology is the United Pentecostal Church. Without a doubt the most popular proponent of this heresy is TD Jakes.

Sadly, his popularity has made it difficult for many to really understand what he really believes. And he hides his modalism very well with a very cleverly disguised statement of faith on his churches web site.

But the church should openly condemn him unless he repents of this heresy. If anyone would like more information about this I'd be happy to provide it for you.

Later in this study, we'll talk about the various roles that each of the members of the trinity serve.

Close

⁷ Paul P Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, Chicago, 1989).