

Handouts

Notes, Questions, Infographics



**What the gospels tell us about
the Trinity,
why it isn't difficult, but extremely
important to understand**



When Jesus was born in Bethlehem.....

- *Was that the start of His existence?*
- *Or was He an eternal part of the Trinity?*
- *What is the Trinity and why is it important to understand it?*
- *These questions and more we'll answer in our lesson today.....*

Your Notes

What the gospels tell us about the Trinity, why it isn't difficult, but extremely important to understand

What happened when Jesus was born in Bethlehem?

- A common misconception people have (without even thinking about it) is that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was the start of his existence.
- That he was born like any other human, lived a life of love and service we should all emulate, and died a tragic death.
- In this lesson we will look at why that view is completely false, and that Jesus was not created when He came into the world.
- Instead, he was "incarnated" – the Second person of the eternal Trinity, as the Apostle John tells us, "*became flesh and made his dwelling among us*" (John 1:14).

Being incarnated means

- Jesus existed before his earthly life as part of the Trinity from all eternity and permanently took on flesh and blood at His birth.
- All 4 of the Gospels recognized the importance of establishing this fact early on as each of them gives an account of his baptism.
- Jesus' baptism is considered one of the primary illustrations/proofs of the Trinity—you'll see why shortly.
- In this lesson we'll look at his Baptism and then we'll go into an explanation of the Trinity, what many people consider one of the most difficult theological concepts—

A view that I totally disagree with!

- God does not intentionally confuse us as to who He is; He desires a relationship with us.
- The challenge to understanding the Trinity is the same challenge of understanding everything else about our faith—***we need to look at God's Word***, which I'll help you do, and not simply accept the statements of "Oh, this is a mystery we can't understand."
- In addition, God has given us teachers in the church such as Tertullian who have clearly clarified the doctrine for us.

Understanding the Trinity is important because....

- Not only is an understanding of the Trinity important to our personal faith, but the Trinity is one of the KEY differences between Christianity and the cults that are distorted interpretations of the Christian faith such as the Mormon religion and Jehovah Witness, in addition to non-Christian religions such Islam.
- All of these have a distorted view of the Trinity, most often centering on a false identity of Jesus.
- Mormons believe Jesus is the physical son of God the Father
- Jehovah Witnesses believe that Jesus was created by God the

Father and is not equal to Him.

- Muslims (followers of Islam) believe Jesus is a prophet but not God.

None of them doubt or deny Jesus existed

- That is impossible to do with the amount of verified history about him.
- But they do not believe Jesus is God in the same way the Father is God and a part of the eternal Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- They say he is either a lesser god, a created being, an exalted human, or simply a revered prophet, very wise perhaps but less than the eternal God—all of which do not agree with what the Bible says about Him.
- This is also the common and popular conception of Jesus today—a good and holy man, a great example, but not God.
- But that is not enough.
- “Who do you say I am?” is the most important question anyone can answer.
- And only Peter’s answer is the correct one, ***“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*** Matt. 16:16

The problem understanding the Trinity isn’t only with other religions

- Most Christians don’t understand the Trinity, which is why it’s hard for them to spot problems with other religion’s views of it.
- If we can’t explain it to ourselves or people who ask us about it, these doubts can lead to other doubts about our faith.
- But the lesson today will clarify the correct doctrine of the Trinity and help you to know and understand more fully the God who created you, redeemed you, and loves you through all eternity.

How we will do this

- First, we’ll establish that the Bible consistently teaches that our God is a Trinity—three persons, one God.
- We will start with evidence of this in all four Gospels in the Baptism of Jesus.
- Then we will look at one of the most common misunderstandings of the Trinity today, then we’ll look at a correct view of it using terms defined by Tertullian, the theologian who coined the word “Trinity.”
- ***And no, the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible—nor is the word “Bible” in the Bible, nor is the word “Christianity” in the Bible.***
- There are many words we use to properly explain Biblical concepts that are not precisely in the Bible, but that are biblically correct.
- Just as reading many Bible passages helps us identify what defines a Christian, so too looking at many passages in the Bible about the Trinity will help us define it—so let’s get started!

Evidence for the Trinity in the New Testament—an early one—the Baptism of Jesus

What about the Old Testament?

- Is Jesus’ baptism the first appearance of the Trinity?
- If Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, where was He then?
- Though we primarily think of God the Father when we think about the Old Testament, in reality the teaching of the Trinity is throughout the Old Testament

Verses about the Trinity in the Old Testament

- It starts in the first verse, Gen. 1:1 *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”* where the word “God” is in plural format (Elohim).
- Also, when *“God (Elohim) said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.” Gen.1:26, NLT,* where God is clearly speaking as a plurality of persons.
- People looking for the Trinity in the Old Testament get very excited about these two uses of the plural term for God.
- But what about The Shema, the statement that seems to clearly state there is only ONE God? Let’s look at it.....

The Shema

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Deut.

6:4,5

- At first reading it’s hard to see any evidence of the Trinity in that and many use this verse to deny the existence of the Trinity.
- However, when you look at the Hebrew word for God in this **verse it is the SAME PLURAL WORD “Elohim” used in Genesis for “God” and in fact the word Elohim, is used for God 2600 times in the Old Testament—in every book, in many settings!**
- See the Blue Letter Bible for the many references
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h430/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

In reality, the Old Testament from the first book to the last chapter

- ***Consistently, in the use of the plural term for God, Elohim, affirms the existence of the Trinity.***
- The use of that word alone doesn’t answer all the questions about the Trinity in the Old Testament, and I’ve done another lesson focusing solely on the ***Trinity in the Old Testament.***
- The lesson is available at www.Bible805.com, and on the podcast and video channels.
- In brief, the many appearances of the “Angel of the Lord,” are in fact appearances of the Pre-incarnate Christ.
- The Holy Spirit is mentioned throughout the Old Testament however, He was not at that time given universally to believers but was given to individuals for special tasks.

Knowing the Trinity is affirmed

- Extensively, consistently in both the Old and New Testaments is one thing and that’s good,
- ***But how can we understand it?***
- How can we explain 3 persons? One God?
- We’ll look at that next, and again—it is NOT difficult to understand.

A well-meaning, but incorrect explanation of the Trinity—Modalism

- **Popularly described explanations for the Trinity: ice, water, steam or one person as husband, father, son***are ALL WRONG as they describe one entity in three various modes**
- **Theological definition: *Modalism, . . . is the unorthodox belief that God is one person who has revealed himself in three forms or modes in contrast to the Trinitarian doctrine where God is one being eternally existing in three persons. According to Modalism, during the incarnation, Jesus was simply God acting in one mode or role, and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was God acting in a different***

mode. Thus, God does not exist as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time. Rather, He is one person and has merely manifested himself in these three modes at various times.

- **This is not what the Trinity is. The correct teaching of the Trinity is one God in three eternal coexistent persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**
- *Modalism was refuted by [the church father] Tertullian (c. 213)it was condemned as heresy by Dionysius, bishop of Rome (c. 262). . . .and by a number of the early church councils.*
<https://www.theopedia.com/modalism>
- **And obviously, Modalism (one being successively in different forms) doesn't make sense if you consider the Baptism of Jesus, where all three Persons of the Trinity are present simultaneously.**

Modalism illustrated

the following charts are in your notes

- In discussing the Trinity, people often use analogies that are incorrect, such as the Trinity is like water that can be in the form of ice, liquid, and steam.
- Though well-meaning, this is the heresy of Modalism. This and similar analogies are not useful, because they are incorrect and leads to false beliefs.

Leads to Oneness Theology

A false belief held by United Pentecostal and United Apostolic Churches

CLASSIC ILLUSTRATION –

THREE DISTINCT PERSONS

Essential to understand because

- If we do not properly understand the Trinity, we do not properly understand who Jesus is or have a true understanding of salvation.
- ***“Modalism ultimately loses the heart of the doctrine of the atonement– that is, the idea that God sent his Son as a substitutionary sacrifice, and that the Son bore the wrath of God in our place, and that the Father, representing the interests of the Trinity, saw the suffering of Christ and was satisfied”*** (p. 242).
Grudem, W. (2000). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Love has no meaning—the “I-thou” necessity of love, if God is love, it is because the Trinity is a relationship, “the original small group.”
- Many of the statements/situations in the New Testament, Jesus’ Baptism, Jesus’ praying to the Father, the Spirit strengthening Him, become illogical statements without an understanding of the Trinity.
- Seeing that Modalism is incorrect, here is a true explanation of the Trinity.....

Tertullian and the true nature of the Trinity

- Tertullian was a brilliant Roman lawyer prior to becoming a Christian and leader in the church.
- As a result of his study and in response to what he believed were false views of the Trinity in his day, he coined the term, Trinity, and defined it as—
- ***una substantia, tres personae***
- ***Meaning God is one substance, in three persons***
- ***See explanatory chart....***

A Biblical view of the Trinity

Tertullian separated substance and personhood because.....

- You can have a trinity of anything that has similar characteristics or that works together in some way—a group of 3 chairs, a government with 3 parts, a trio, a group of 3 people singing together.
- **But what makes THE TRINITY unique is its substantia, its substance, the attributes of it, not just that it has 3 parts.**
- *ONLY THE TRINITY of GOD has the substance of eternity, omnipotence, total truth, immutability, et. al. and that substance, those attributes are shared equally and eternally by each member of the Trinity.*

God's substance sets the three persons of the Trinity apart—

What does it mean to be a person?

We'll now look at defining characteristics of personhood we for each person of the Trinity

- Not mystical ideas—but tangible characteristics, We'll talk about each of these for EACH MEMBER of the of the Trinity along with a verse that illustrates it.
- **Relationships with other persons**
- **Intellect**
- **Emotions**
- **Will**
- That we could do this was surprising to me when I first studied the Trinity—I thought of Jesus as a Person, but that God the Father and especially the Holy Spirit were also persons, in the same way Jesus was a person was not something I understood prior to this study.
- Let's now look at the biblical evidence of the personhood of each member of the Trinity—there is much more in the Bible, but here is a useful foundation....

God the Father

- **Engages in personal relations:** The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. (*John 3:35*)
- **Intellect:** Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! (*Matt. 6:8*)
- **Emotions:** But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. (*Ps. 86:15*)
- **Will:** For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (*Matthew 12:50*)

God the Son

- **The Son engages in personal relations with God and people:** Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, I'm grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I've spoken so that they might believe that you sent me" (*John 11:41–42*)
- **Intellect:** But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew all about people. No one needed to tell him about human nature, for he knew what was in each person's heart. (*John 2:24–25*)
- **Emotions:** He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. (*Matt. 9:36 MSG*)
- Jesus wept. (*John 11:35*)
- Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. (*John 13:1*)
- **Will:** Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless

not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42)

God the Holy Spirit is a person

- **The Holy Spirit engages in personal relations:** The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." (Acts 8:29, NLT)
- **Intellect:** And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. (Rom. 8:27, NLT)
- **Emotions:** But they rebelled against him and grieved his Holy Spirit. So, he became their enemy and fought against them. (Isa. 63:10, NLT)
- And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. (Eph. 4:30, NLT)
- **Will:** It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have. (1 Cor. 12:11, NLT)

Relationships in the Trinity—Jesus interacting with the Father

- **Know each other**
- No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. (Matt. 11:27, MSG)
- **Love each other**
- The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. (John 3:35, NLT)
- **Speak to each other**
- Then [after successful sending out of the 70] he was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and said, "I praise you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the intellectuals and worldly wise and for revealing them to those who are as trusting as little children. Yes, thank you, Father, for that is the way you wanted it. (Luke 10:21, TLB)

The Holy Spirit was continuously involved in the life of Jesus

- **From His Conception:** The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 NLT)
- **His Temptation:** Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (Luke 4:1 NKJV).
- **His Ministries:** Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region (Luke 4:14 NKJV).
- God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38 NLT).
- **His Resurrection:** But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:11 NKJV).

In their interactions, each person of the Trinity has a different role

- The theological term when discussing these roles is the "Economic Trinity."
- The term "economic" in the term "Economic Trinity" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means, literally, "household management." (from www.gotquestions.org).
- It is the term that describes the different roles that the members of the

Trinity have, while all working towards the same goals.

Here's how it works in our salvation

- **God the Father initiates, sends** *"For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son (John 3:16)."*
- **God the Son, Jesus accomplishes the work of salvation,** *"He (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:2).*
- **God the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews us,** *". . .according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5).*
- And they do it all together in perfect love, harmony, deferring to one another when appropriate, working to glorify each other—all examples for how we should work together.

Subjective comments and final application

- I wonder if part of our problem in understanding the Trinity is the challenge of understanding the relationships within the Trinity.
- 3 persons—totally loving towards one another, submission to the will of each other, united in purpose, in constant communication with each other, and so expansive in their love that they created and redeemed humanity.
- It is totally astounding and hard to believe, though we know it is true—not only as a doctrine for us to understand, but an example for us to follow—
- ***May we become more like the Trinity in our relationships to each other as we, as we grow in our knowledge of and personal relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit better.***

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**What the gospels tell us about the Trinity,
why it isn't difficult, but extremely important to understand**

Important suggestions: be sure everyone in the group gets a chance to contribute—freely share YOUR thoughts, insights, questions—truly interact with each other and God's Word.

1. What was your understanding of the Trinity before the class? What questions did you have about it?
2. Why and how is the Baptism of Jesus an important illustration of the Trinity?
3. What do we know about the Trinity in the Old Testament?
4. What is the problem with Modalism (explanations that the Trinity is like ice, water, and steam) in explaining the Trinity?
5. What is the correct view of the Trinity according to Tertullian?
6. APPLICATION: What does it mean to you that the members of the Trinity are persons? How should we treat each other based on how the members of the Trinity treat each other?

Biblical View of the Trinity

ONE GOD

ONE SUBSTANCE

All share in the same attributes,
equally and eternally

THREE PERSONS

Distinct persons eternally co-existing
Eternally sharing the same attributes

Holy

1 Samuel 2:2 There is none holy like the Lord;
there is none besides you; 1 Samuel 2:2
“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord Almighty” – Revelation 4:8

Just

“The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He.” Deut. 32:4

Merciful

“The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and
great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are
over all His works.” Psalm 145:8-9

Love

“Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God
and knows God. . . God is love.” 1 John 4:7-8

Truth

“God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,” Titus 1:2
“And we know that the Son of God has come . . . This is the true
God and eternal life.” 1 John 5:20

All-knowing, Omniscient

“You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts
from afar. . . . Before a word is on my tongue you,
LORD, know it completely.” Psalms 139:1-6

Everywhere, Omnipresent

“Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall
not see him?” says the LORD; “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” says
the LORD. Jeremiah 23:24

All-powerful, Omnipotent

“Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by
your great power and outstretched arm.
Nothing is too hard for you.” Jeremiah 32:17-18

Immutable, Unchangeable

“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants
of Jacob, are not destroyed.” Malachi 3:6

Eternal

“For thus says the One who is high and
lifted up, who inhabits eternity...” Isaiah 57:15
“To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor
and glory forever and ever. Amen.” 1 Timothy 1:17

**God,
The Father**

**God,
The Son**

**God,
The Holy Spirit**

Views of the Trinity

MODALISM
WRONG

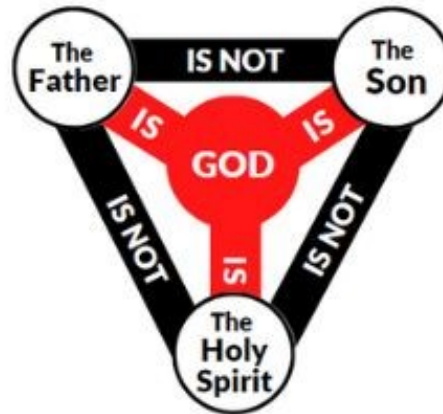
The
Father

becomes

The
Son

becomes

The
Holy
Spirit



ARIANISM
WRONG

The
Father

creates

The
Son

also created

The
Holy
Spirit

CORRECT TRINITARIAN
Three persons, eternally co-existing

The correct view of the Trinity illustrates three eternally co-existing persons as the center image shows.

Modalism wrongly teaches the Creator as the Father, becomes the Son, as the Savior, who then becomes the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier in the same way that water, as one substance can progressively be solid, liquid, and steam--correct regarding water, wrong regarding our Triune God.

A modern-day expression of Modalism leads to Oneness theology, a false belief held by United Pentecostal and United Apostolic Churches that believes the Father in the Old Testament became the Son in the New Testament who then became the Holy Spirit today. This false belief is easily refuted when we look at the Baptism of Jesus when all three members of the Trinity were present and many other passages in the Bible.

Arianism wrongly teaches that the Father created both the Son and Holy Spirit and incorrectly makes them noneternal lesser creations.

Modern-day beliefs influenced by Arianism include the Mormon religion and the Muslim religion in that both believe that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not co-eternal with God the Father.

There are many other false views of the Trinity, but rather than focus on them, the best thing to do is focus on the truth of the Trinity, one God, One Substance, Three Persons, eternally co-existing.

The precise relationship of Jesus with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit took the church centuries to articulate clearly. It is expressed in the Creeds, which are statements of faith in the church, based on God's Word. The Nicene Creed is one of the earlier ones and is accepted universally.

The book *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*, is an excellent read as to the importance of the foundation of these firm beliefs and statements of faith in the church. A bit scholarly, but highly recommended if you like to explore this type of learning.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
**God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,**
consubstantial to the father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

—[Episcopal Church Book of Common Prayer](#) (1979), [The Book of Common Prayer](#). New York: Church Hymnal Corporation. 1979. pp. 358–359. Retrieved 2021-11-06.

