

# THE223 Christian Narrative 1 Creation and Fall

## Unit 1b The Concept of the Trinity

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In this session, we will start our investigation into the concept of the Trinity. Now, some of you may be wondering, “Why are we starting a course which is supposed to focus on creation and fall by discussing the Trinity?” Well, consider this. If we’re to understand all that God has done in the act of creation, then first we must understand, at least to the best of our ability, God Himself, for as we will see throughout this course, much of what God created reflects his character, his nature, and his will. As we begin our discussion of the Trinity, let me start with our main teaching point for this session. God in Himself has both unity and diversity. Our goal in this session is not to dive fully into the well-developed concept of the Trinity. We’ll do this subsequently. Rather, in this session, we will focus on the idea that the Holy Scriptures reveal to us a God who simultaneously exists in both unity and diversity. We’re going to set the foundation for a later discussion of the developed concept of the Trinity

Let’s introduce this idea of God in Himself having both unity and diversity by looking at the very first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. You’ll note in Genesis 1:1, we are told that “God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth.” But a mere 25 verses later, we see God in dialogue when he states, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Here we see the plural verb “let us” and the plural pronoun “our” being used. The question is simply what do these two words mean? Certainly over the centuries, several theories have been offered which attempt to explain away the divine diversity that seems, at least at face value, to be so clearly evident here. But each has fallen ultimately short. Some have suggested that this is a form of kingly speech. In other words, that God is here using the “royal we.” Now, if you’ve ever seen Wreck It Ralph, then you know that the royal we is nothing more than one person speaking in the plural in order to sound more officious or representative. The problem with this idea is that nowhere else in the Old Testament Hebrew do we find other examples of the royal we. So there really is no evidence to support this idea or theory. Others have suggested that God was speaking to the angels in verse 26 of chapter 1. But angels are not involved in creation, so this idea also falls short. What we have in the very first chapter of the Bible is the picture of a God who, in Himself, is both unified and diverse. So God in Himself has both unity and diversity.

But let’s take a deeper look at both this unity of God and this diversity of God, starting with His unity. We derive the unity of God primarily from theology proper, that is, the study of God Himself. So because of what God reveals about Himself, and further because of what rational logic dictates, we can confess that there is in the divine being one indivisible essence. So here we have this statement we just mentioned a moment ago. There is in the divine being but one indivisible essence. What we will do throughout this PowerPoint is look at two key sections of this statement. First, we will unpack the meaning behind the word “essence.” Second, we will unpack the phrase “one indivisible” together. At the outset, let me state that God is ultimately one in His essential constitution or nature.

So let’s talk about the essence of the divine being. By the way, divine being is simply a philosophical placeholder we use to discuss the Christian God. The reason we use this phrase and not the more generic term God or even the more specific term Yahweh is because we want to see that the most basic nature of this God or divine being, as we’re using the phrase here, actually precedes that which God reveals about Himself in the Bible. You see, in the Bible, Yahweh discloses to us who He is. However, today, we’re looking at His essential nature given what we can learn about Him not directly through the Scriptures, but rather through reason, logic, and philosophy, all of which, by the way, are expressions of the mind with which we have been created. Makes sense?

So let's look at this word "essence." In his Systematic Theology, Berkhof notes that the essence of God is best understood by looking at two separate words. Now, these words are the ones that you see in front of you. *Esse* or essence, and *substare* or substance. Each word carries a slightly different understanding. However, the two in concert give us a well-rounded understanding of the divine being's essence. So essence, *esse*, is an active word that carries the idea of being. If we were to look the word up in the dictionary, it would be defined as the basic nature of something, the qualities that make a thing what it is. So when we are talking about God as the divine being, we must recognize that the divine being simply is. That is, the divine being, God, has an inherent energetic being as part of His essence. From this and what we also know about God in the Bible, we can then go on to say that the divine being is—are you ready for this? —the sum total of infinite spiritual perfection. The essence of the divine being is infinitely perfect and spiritual in its nature.

Now, the second word that helps us understand the essential essence of the divine being is the word "substance." This is a passive word which complements the more active word "essence." Where essence carries the concept of being, substance communicates what Berkhof calls the latent possibility of being. Everything that could possibly come to be is contained in the essence of this divine being. Now, this word "substance" has a more material connotation as opposed to the spiritual nature of the word "esse." In trying to picture this word in action, we must imagine that housed within the divine being is all that was and all that is necessary for everything else within creation to both exist and be sustained. But since we're considering the nature of this divine being even before creation, we must declare that this substance was and is latent. That is, in the divine being, the sum total of infinite activity is present even before anything else came to be. So to review, the essence of the divine being is both passive and active. The essence of God includes the sum total of infinite spiritual perfection and the sum total of infinite activity.

Now, let's turn our attention to the phrase "one indivisible" used to describe the essence of the divine being. By "one indivisible," we mean two things. First, God is numerically one. And second, God is perfect. So let's unpack each of these ideas briefly. First, God is numerically one. The church fathers used the phrase "unitas singularitates" to describe the unique singular nature of God. What this phrase simply conveys is that God, the divine being, is numerically one and, as such, absolutely unique. There are no other beings that are like him. Now, second, we see that God is perfect. The church fathers used the phrase "unitas simplicitates" to describe the perfection of God. This phrase conveys the idea that God is perfect and, as such, is completely free from division because if He could be divided, he could not be one. This means that God's whole being includes all.

Now, the uniqueness and perfection of God are concepts which are actually derived from the study of God, theology proper. While that subject is outside the purview of our course, let me briefly note three attributes of God which are foundational to his uniqueness and perfection. God could not be both unique and perfect if he was not self-existent. Theology proper teaches us that God exists in an eternal, self-sustaining, and necessary way. Second, God cannot be both unique and perfect if he did not have aseity. This is a word used to define a person who draws life from within. Theology proper teaches us that God has life in Himself and draws His unending energy from Himself. Finally, in order to be both perfect and unique, God must be immutable. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "God is a spirit whose being, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable." The divine being is simple and single. He is unique and perfect.

Now, let's take a look at God's diversity. As we contemplate God's diversity, we rely on logic and the progressive revelation of the Scriptures. Also, like we did with discussing unity, we'll consider a confession and then seek to unpack that concept of God's diversity from within the confession. The Bible reveals and logic dictates then that we can confess the following. The Bible progressively reveals that the divine being is both a personal and triunal being. Now, let's unpack this phrase like we did before with our last phrase. The phrase in front of us, "The Bible progressively reveals that the divine being is both a personal and triunal being." So first, we will unpack the personal nature of the divine being. Then we will look at the phrase "progressively reveals." And finally, we'll consider the idea of the Bible revealing a triunal being.

I want us to consider three basic ideas about personality. First, personality cannot develop in isolation. Rather, it is only when the ego is awakened by contact with another ego that consciousness occurs. So if the divine being has personality, then logically this personality requires plurality. Second, association with an equal alone can develop personality. It's not enough for the divine being to develop personality by interacting with the things that it creates. God's personality cannot be derived from His creation, just like the personality of a human being cannot be derived from his interaction with a dog. Equality is essential for personality. So we can argue then that if the divine being is personal, then His personality conveys both plurality and an equality. These things must exist in such a way that they do not threaten the divine being's uniqueness and perfection.

And as we begin to peruse the Bible for evidence of such a divine being, we begin to discover that the Bible does indeed progressively show us such a divine being in the God of the Bible. When we begin to look in the Old Testament, we see that God uses the plural "we" when discussing His work. We can see this in Genesis 1, 3, and 11. We also see God speaking amongst himself in a plethora of places: Psalm 33, Psalm 45, Psalm 110, Isaiah 63, 48, 61, Hosea 1, and Hebrews 1. We see God interacting with the Angel of the Lord. We see the word of God personified. We even see wisdom personified. Then moving into the New Testament, we see God working in concert with Himself in such places as Matthew 3, Matthew 28, 1 Corinthians 12, 2 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 1, and then Jude 20 and 21. And what we see throughout these and other passages is that the word of God more clearly begins to show us a shared work among the Persons of God. All of these revelations indicate that God in Himself has both unity and diversity.

But truly what we begin to see is that God is not only personal. He is, in fact, also triunal. Now, we can say this because the fullness of God is seen best in His triunal being. Ephesians 3:14-19 offer us a poignant example of such a statement. That passage reads, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from Whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled (here it is) with all the fullness of God." The Bible does, in fact, progressively reveal to us that the divine being is both personal and triunal.

So as we conclude today, let's remind ourselves that what we attempted to do was to understand the idea that God in Himself has both unity and diversity. To do this, we unpacked two statements. First, we looked at how there is in the divine being but one indivisible essence. Second, we looked at the idea that

the Bible progressively reveals that the divine being is both a personal and triunal being. As we end this session, let's end in the humble admiration of a God who is so unique and so powerful that He can exist in unity and diversity simultaneously.