

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 3b The Doctrine of the Trinity, Part 2

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

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We can know the truth about God if we so desire. Jesus said, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” [Jhn 7:17] Paul attempted to explain the mystery of God to the people when he said, “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ.” [Col 2:2]

Misconception number three: The doctrine of the Trinity is unreasonable. Now, although the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to comprehend, it is not unreasonable. While some of the truths with respect to the Trinity are beyond human reason, they are certainly not contrary to reason. Reason, however, should not be our final test of truth. Reason is flawed by sin. A person who does not accept the Bible as the true revelation from God has no reason to believe the Trinity. But those who accept the Scripture as God’s inspired word can do nothing other than accept this truth. The key issue then is this: Is the Trinity taught in Scripture? The answer is yes. However, the Scripture does not attempt to explain the Trinity in its entirety. It simply declares it.

Misconception number four: The doctrine cannot be true because the word Trinity is not found in the Bible. Well, it is true that the word Trinity is not found in the Bible. This has led some to the conclusion that the belief in the Trinity, the concept of the Trinity, in the doctrine of the Trinity, is not biblical. However, the word theology is not found in the Bible either, and yet here we are in a class on systematic theology. Theology, the word, means the study of God. No one doubts that the Bible teaches theology because the precise term is not used. In the same manner, the Trinity is taught in Scripture without the use of the term in Scripture. It is not the specific word Trinity that is the issue. The real question is, as we have just stated, does the teaching about the Trinity conform to what the Bible says about God’s nature? That is the real issue.

Misconception number five: The Trinity doctrine simply cannot be true because it is not explicitly taught in Scripture. Well, the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in any explicit statement in Scripture. There are no formal doctrinal statements that define or teach the Trinity. Terms such as Trinity, three persons, and one substance are not found in the New Testament. Since there is no developed teaching concerning the Trinity in Scripture, it is argued that the New Testament does not teach this doctrine. To that we say that while the exact terms that Christians use to describe the Trinity are not found in the New Testament, the ideas on which these terms are expressed are clearly there. The truth of the Trinity is found by comparing what the Bible itself says about the nature of God. That is the focus of this class. Who is God? What is he like? The basis of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is most certainly found in Scripture. Moreover, what the Bible teaches about the nature of God assumes that God is a trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity should not be rejected because a formal or explicit statement is lacking or because the belief is not fully developed in Scripture.

Misconception number six: The Trinity denies the oneness of God. Now, it is often charged that the Trinity doctrine denies the existence of only one God because the Trinity consists of three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that there are three different Gods, as we’ve previously stated, or three separate Gods, as we have also previously stated. God is one essence, one substance.

He is not a being made up of three separate parts. Neither is God three separate individuals. The doctrine of the Trinity does not make Jesus a second God and the Holy Spirit a third God. There is only one God. The three members of the Trinity are equal in substance. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity does not deny the oneness of God.

Misconception number seven: God cannot be three persons and one person at the same time. Now, that is mathematically true. Something can't be two things at the same time. But theologically, one of the problems in understanding has to do with the English word "person." Since the word person can be used in two different senses, it can cause confusion when explaining the meaning of the three persons of the Trinity. When Christians speak of God as three persons, they are not saying that God is three separate entities or there are three parts of God. God is one substance or one essence. He cannot be divided into parts. And the doctrine of the Trinity does not divide God into parts. The doctrine of the Trinity recognizes one God who exists in three distinct personalities. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are eternal personal distinctions within the nature of God. In this sense, God is indeed three persons.

However, there is another sense in which the word "person" is used. When the God of the Bible speaks, he usually speaks as I, as one person. When humans pray to God, they pray to him as you, in the singular, never the plural. We don't pray to "y'all". And this reflects the fact that he is a single personal being. If the word person is used in the sense of a unique individual being, then God is one person in that sense of the term. The word person can possibly be misleading because to us, it implies separate beings. Three persons to us would be three different people. However, person seems to be as good a word as we have that can express what the Scripture teaches. Consequently, God can be and is described as three persons or as one person, depending on how the word person is being used. The traditional Christian usage of the word person focuses on the distinction of the three members of the Trinity.

Misconception eight: The Trinity was invented by the church. This charge is often made, and that is, that the doctrine of the Trinity is something that was formulated long after the apostles died. Supposedly, it was a product of the thinking of early Christians, not the Bible. The earliest use of the word Trinity is found by the church father Tertullian who lived around AD 166. It is not certain when the term was invented. Trinity comes from the Latin word *trinus* meaning threefold. Regardless, the early Christians had a basic belief in the unity of God. They believed in only one God. However, they were faced with the clear teachings of Jesus as to his identity. He claimed a position of equal authority to the Father. Indeed, in a large way, this is why the Jews put him to death because they claimed that he blasphemed. He said he was God. The same is true with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God could guide, teach believers, indwell in them.

The church was then faced with the following facts. The Bible teaches there is only one God. Although God is a unity, he is a compound unity made up of three distinct persons. The only reasonable conclusion to make is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are together the one God, the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine was not invented by the church.

Rather, it was a result of understanding what the Bible had to say concerning the nature of God. Almost all of the criticisms laid at the doctrine of the Trinity are a result of a misunderstanding of the belief. This is why it is crucial that the doctrine of the Trinity be defined and clarified. This is why it is crucial that we study it. One must be precise with their terms and definitions to gain an understanding of this doctrine.

As we study the concept of the Trinity, we can walk in the footsteps of the early church fathers who wrestled with much the same questions that we are. As they worked through these questions of important doctrines, they published their work in the form of church creeds. Church creeds are statements of belief that were formulated to express what Christians believed. They were usually written in response to some false teaching that arose at that time. The creeds clarified the truth about the faith. Now, this is very important. While the creeds are not to be considered as equal to Scripture, they do provide an insight for us about what early Christians believed.

Now, there are three great creeds to which western Christianity confesses: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Anathasian Creed. The Apostles' Creed, which is the earliest statement of Christian beliefs, does not mention the Trinity. It is a very compact formula and doctrine. If this was the only creed written, one might assume that the Father alone is God and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are lesser in character, for only the Father is referred to as divine in the Apostles' Creed. However, the creed was not anti-Trinitarian. The issue was simply not covered. However, the Nicene Creed, which was written in AD 325 and added to in AD 381, is clearly Trinitarian in outlook. It states that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all divine and of one substance or essence. This is the crux of Trinitarian belief. The Anathasian Creed came in centuries later. It was named after the 4th century defender of the Trinity, Anathasius. It is even stronger with its statement about the Trinity. The creed says, "So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet there are not three Gods, but one God."

So in conclusion of this part, there are a number of misconceptions that must be cleared up when considering the doctrine of the Trinity. In that, the following points need to be made. First, the Trinity is not a pagan idea. It is based on what the Bible has to say about the nature of God. There is no credible evidence that the Trinity was borrowed from any other pagan belief. The Trinity doctrine is difficult for humans to comprehend, but not impossible. The mystery of the Trinity means it is a truth that was formerly secret that God has now revealed to humanity. The Trinity doctrine is not contrary to reason. Reason should not be the ultimate test as to what is true and what is false. But the doctrine is not contrary to reason. The doctrine of the Trinity does not destroy the oneness of God. Much confusion surrounds the word person with reference to the Trinity. The three members of the Trinity are persons in the sense of distinct personalities, not separate individuals. The Trinity is not formally or explicitly taught in Scripture. The church did not invent the doctrine of the Trinity. The church only recognized what the Bible taught on this subject. Although the term Trinity is not found in the Bible, the Scripture teaches one God exists in three persons.