



Awaken 365

The nature and attributes of God: The Trinity

(Handout)

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How does the Bible reveal God as three persons yet one?

How did this understanding come about?

Why is it important in our relationship with God and how does it shape prayer and worship?

Suggested reading

Systematic Theology. Wayne Grudem. Chapter 14.

Incomparable. Andrew Wilson. Pages 151 to 215

1. Introduction:



"God exists as three persons yet He is one God.....

The biblical teaching on the Trinity tells us that all of God's attributes are true of all three persons, for each is fully God. Thus, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are also eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, infinitely wise, infinitely holy, infinitely loving, omniscient and so forth.....

God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."

Wayne Grudem. Systematic Theology

"To reflect upon God in His Three-in-oneness yet perfect unity and harmony in mutual, everlasting love, is to catch a vision of something so unspeakably glorious, even beautiful and attractive that it has ever and again down the centuries, moved men and women to the heights of adoring worship, love and praise."

Bruce Milne

The triangle of orthodoxy.

- The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each fully God. John 1:1-4. John 20:28. Isaiah 9:6. Acts 5:3-4. 1 Corinthians 12:6. 2 Corinthians 13:14. Ephesians 4:4-6.
- There is one God. Deuteronomy 6:4-5.
- The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct. John 1:1-2. John 17:24. 1 John 2:1. John 14:26. John 16:7.

Errors outside of the triangle of orthodoxy

- The denial of the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit
- The denial of one God
- The denial that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct

2. Old Testament revelation:

God reveals Himself to His people as 'One' God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) in contrast to the heathen nations that had many 'gods'.

However, there are also specific words that speak of 'plurality' within One God. Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 3:22-23. Elohim (singular El), translated as '*Let **us** make man in **our** image*'.

Other pointers are Psalm 110:1 which was quoted by Jesus.

The LORD says to my lord:

*"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."*

The coming Messiah would be more than a mere man. **Daniel 7:13-14.**

'.....there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.'

3. **New Testament revelation:**

The oneness of God is affirmed. Mark 12:29-32, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Ephesians 4:6 and James 2:19.

The trinity is referenced.

Matthew 28:19, John 14:15-23, Acts 2:32-33, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 1:1-14, 3:16-19.

Each 'person' of the Godhead is described as **fully divine**.

The Father: Matthew 6:8. Galatians 1:1-3

The Son: John 1:1-18 (*With God* - separate personality. Was God – same substance). Hebrews 1:3.

The Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17. John 14: 15-21

4. **Historical developments of the doctrine**

The Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Called to discuss and settle the nature of Jesus Christ, the 'Son of God'. Was He God as the Father is God? Was He fully divine and fully human?

Arius was teaching an error: (Known as 'Arianism').

- There is one God, the Father, who is eternal.
- This cannot be shared otherwise God is divisible or subject to change.
- The Son must therefore be a 'creature' who the Father formed out of nothing and so the Son is not eternal or self-existent like the Father.
- The Son could not fully know the Father.
- The Son could change and even sin.
- His title, 'Son of God' was just a courtesy title.

Opposed by many bishops throughout the church who considered it heresy and not reflecting the teaching of the scriptures.

One of the issues was what it means 'to beget'.

Colossians 1:15. Jesus, *'the firstborn over all creation'*.

The 'firstborn' refers to rights, privileges and authority. (Hebrews 12:16. Greek 'prototokia'. Colossians 1:15. Greek 'protokos')



Up to and following the Council of Nicea, in 325 AD there was a debate about the words:

- 'homoousios'. Was Jesus 'of the **same** substance' as the Father?

OR

- homoiousios. Was Jesus 'of **like** substance' to the Father?

It was called the '*battle of the diphthong*' as it was about one important letter! Homoousios verses Homoiousios
'Homoousios' was accepted as biblical. = Same substance

From this the '**The Nicene Creed**' was written as the statement of orthodoxy and the revelation of the scriptures.
It reads:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of light, Very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance (homoousios-consubstantial) with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven, from there He shall come to judge both the quick and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit.

They also added:

But as for those who say, there was when He was not, and, before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance (ousia) or is created or is subject to alteration or change- these the Catholic Church anathematizes (places under a curse)."

In A.D. 381, at 'The Council of Constantinople', the creed was extended to affirm that **the Holy Spirit** was also fully God.



It reads:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, light from light, Very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; and suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the Prophets. And in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This creed was and is accepted as orthodox teaching by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches

The so-called 'Filioque' clause, (Latin *filioque*, "and the Son"), was later inserted after the words "*the Holy Spirit, ...who proceeds from the Father,*" by the western church. It was gradually introduced as part of a revised creed beginning in the 6th century probably at the Council of Toledo in 589 AD. It has been retained by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches.

The Eastern churches have always rejected this 'filioque'. They consider it a theological error and an unauthorized addition to the original credal documents (The Nicene/Constantinople Creeds). Their emphasis is on the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son being eternally begotten of the Father.

It was part of a split between the Eastern and Western churches which was finalised in 1054.

5. Why is the Nicene Creed important?

- It is important to distinguish between orthodox and heretical doctrines.



- It brings an understanding of God's work of salvation.
- It shapes our knowledge of God and therefore relationship with God.
- It helps us in prayer and worship.
- It helps us to understand how God is at work.

6. **Functions within the trinity:**

There is a certain order revealed in the Bible between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Son is '*eternally begotten of the Father*'. (Not an event which took place as a 'one off' in time but rather an eternal relationship.)

The Spirit is said to proceed from the Father and the Son (John 15:26). He is called the 'Spirit of Christ' as well as 'the Spirit of God'.

This order however does not imply inequality. Each is co-equal and fully divine.

7. **The eternal relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.**

There has always been one God in three persons. The relationship between them was one of love. (John 17:24). God is love and this is expressed between the three persons so God is never 'alone'.

In His essential nature God exists in the community of the Trinity.

8. **Sects, cults and deviations.**

A variety of so-called 'Christian' sects and cults deviate in their teaching of the Trinity and particularly the nature of Christ (The Son) and the Holy Spirit who they deny as being divine.

These include:

Theosophy, Unitarianism, Christian Science, Children of God, Moonies, Christadelphians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons.

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