

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 6: THE HOLY TRINITY

Lesson 19

One God in Three Persons — The Mystery of the Trinity

The Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith

**Key Texts: Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Matthew 3:16–17; John 1:1–3;
Genesis 1:26**

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — One God, Three Persons, Eternally One

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Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

With Lesson 19 we cross the most significant theological threshold in the entire Theology Proper series. In Units 1 through 5 we have been studying the God who is, His knowability and the language we use to speak of Him, His existence and unity, His revealed names, His incommunicable and communicable attributes. We have been pressing into one after another of the facets of the infinite divine character, and at every point we have been enriched, humbled, and awed. But in all of those lessons, as rich and as essential as they have been, we have been approaching the God of Scripture as it were from the outside, from the perspective of the creature examining the Creator. Now, in Unit 6, we stand before the most interior and most profound mystery in all of Christian theology: the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not merely one doctrine among others in Christian theology. It is the central doctrine of the Christian faith, the doctrine that distinguishes the God of the Bible from every other god in every other religion, the doctrine without which the gospel cannot be stated, the atonement cannot be understood, the Christian life cannot be explained, and the eternal hope of the church cannot be secured. Augustine said it well: “In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more rewarding.” If the stakes of every theological question are high, the stakes of this one are the highest.

The Trinitarian doctrine in its classic formulation states: there is one God who eternally exists as three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This formulation is simultaneously the simplest and the most inexhaustible statement in the whole of theology. It is simple because it can be stated in a single sentence. It is inexhaustible because every phrase in that sentence, one God, eternally exists, three Persons, Father Son and Spirit, opens onto depths that have occupied the greatest theological minds in the history of the church, and that will occupy the worshipping delight of the redeemed throughout all of eternity. In this lesson we will lay the essential foundation: what the doctrine means and does not mean, the biblical evidence from which it is drawn, and why it matters absolutely for everything the church believes and does.

I. The Doctrine Stated: One “What” and Three “Whos”

The doctrine of the Trinity can be stated in three essential propositions, each of which is taught in Scripture and each of which is necessary for the full orthodox formulation:

First, there is only one God. Biblical monotheism is absolute, uncompromising, and pervasive throughout both Testaments. The Shema, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God; the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NASB 1995), is the foundational confession of Israel and of the New Testament church. Paul’s declaration “there is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4, NASB 1995) is made in explicit dialogue with the polytheism of the Greco-Roman world. There is one God. This is the non-negotiable starting point of Trinitarian theology.

Second, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Each of the three Persons is fully, genuinely, and identically divine, not a third of God, not a mode or manifestation of God, not a creature elevated to divine status, but truly and fully God in the complete and undivided sense that the word “God” carries. The Father is the God whom Jesus addressed in prayer and called “Abba” (Romans 8:15). The Son is “the Word,” and “the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Holy Spirit is “THE LORD” (2 Corinthians 3:17) to whom Ananias lied when he lied “to God” (Acts 5:3–4).

Third, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are genuinely distinct from one another. They are not three names for the same Person, not three roles played by a single divine actor on the stage of redemptive history, not three manifestations of an underlying divine unity that is itself without personal differentiation. They are three genuinely distinct Persons who relate to each other, love each other, send and are sent by each other, and dwell in each other in the eternal, perfect, self-sufficient community that constitutes the inner life of God.

The theological tradition has expressed these three propositions with careful precision by distinguishing between the one divine “essence” or “nature” (the “what” of God: what God is) and the three divine “Persons” or “hypostases” (the “who” of God: who God is). God is one “what” and three “whos.” He is one in essence, one in being, one in all the attributes we have studied in Units 1 through 5, for the holiness of God is not divided between three Persons, nor is the love of God apportioned in thirds. Every attribute belongs to God as God, and therefore to each Person fully and without division. But He is three in Person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each a genuinely distinct hypostasis, each truly and fully God, each related to the others in an eternal relationship of distinction and mutual indwelling.

The careful precision of the theological grammar here is not pedantry; it is the minimum necessary to guard the doctrine against the distortions that have threatened it throughout the church’s history, and to ensure that what we confess when we confess the Trinity is actually the God of Scripture and not a sophisticated philosophical construction that has lost touch with the living God who speaks, acts, loves, and saves in the pages of both Testaments.

II. What the Trinity Is Not: The Three Great Historical Errors

The doctrine of the Trinity has been misunderstood and distorted in characteristic directions throughout the church’s history, and those distortions remain live temptations in contemporary theology and popular religion. Three errors stand out as the most persistent and the most theologically damaging.

A. Tritheism: Three Gods

Tritheism is the error of treating the three Persons of the Trinity as three separate and independent Gods, a divine council or divine family of three individuals who share a common nature but are ultimately numerically distinct beings. Tritheism honors the genuine distinction of the Persons but compromises the absolute unity of the divine essence. If the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate Gods, then Christianity is

a form of polytheism, and the foundational monotheism of both Testaments is surrendered.

Contemporary tritheism rarely presents itself as explicit polytheism; it manifests most commonly in the popular tendency to speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit as “three different people” with “three different personalities” who “work together” toward a common purpose. The language is not wrong in itself, the Persons do have distinct personal properties, and they do act in concert, but when the grammar of “three individuals collaborating” replaces the grammar of “one God in three Persons,” the drift toward tritheism has begun. The corrective is the affirmation of divine simplicity: the one divine essence is not divided among three Persons; it is possessed by each Person in its full, undivided totality.

B. Modalism: One God in Three Modes

Modalism is the error of treating the three names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as three different modes in which the single, undifferentiated God presents Himself to human experience, without any genuine personal distinction in the divine being itself. On the modalist account, God is Father when He relates to His people as Creator and providential Governor; He is Son when He becomes incarnate for our redemption; He is Spirit when He indwells and sanctifies believers. The same divine Person plays three different roles at different times, or perhaps simultaneously, but there is no genuine tri-personal reality in God’s own inner life.

Modalism (also called Sabellianism, after the third-century teacher Sabellius) was condemned as heresy by the early church because it cannot account for the genuine personal distinctions that the Scripture presents with such insistence. If God is modally Father and modally Son, then the Son cannot genuinely pray to the Father (Matthew 26:39), the Father cannot genuinely send the Son (John 3:16), the Father cannot genuinely speak to the Son at His baptism (Matthew 3:17), and the Son cannot genuinely give the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26). Modalism turns the relational drama of redemption into theater, divine performance rather than divine reality. The contemporary form of modalism is the popular preacher’s illustration of “water, ice, and steam” or “a man who is simultaneously father, husband, and son”: well-intentioned but deeply misleading.

C. Arianism: One God with Two Lesser Beings

Arianism, named for the Alexandrian theologian Arius (ca. 256–336 AD), holds that the Son is the first and greatest of God’s creatures, a being of supreme dignity and glory, more than any other creature, but nonetheless a creature: “there was a time when He was not.” The Spirit is similarly subordinated in the Arian scheme. Arianism honors the absolute uniqueness of the Father while denying the full deity of the Son and the Spirit.

Arianism was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, where the church affirmed that the Son is “of the same substance” (*homoousios*) with the Father, not “of similar substance” (*homoiousios*, the semi-Arian position) but of the identical divine essence. The importance of the Nicene settlement can scarcely be overstated: if the Son is not fully God, if He is a creature, however exalted, then the cross is not the self-

giving of God for our salvation but the sacrifice of a supremely good creature, and the propitiation we examined in Lesson 15 lacks the infinite weight that the infinite holiness of God requires. A creaturely atonement cannot satisfy a divine wrath; only the God-Man, fully God and fully human, can stand in the gap between the holy God and the guilty sinner.

Arianism continues to live in contemporary form through Jehovah's Witnesses and certain forms of Unitarianism, and its spirit, the desire for a simpler, more rationally accessible version of God, is a permanent temptation for a theology that has lost its sense of the genuine mystery and genuine necessity of the Trinitarian revelation.

III. The Biblical Evidence: A Progressive but Comprehensive Witness

The doctrine of the Trinity is a revealed doctrine, one that could not be arrived at by unaided reason and that is known only because God has been pleased to disclose it in the progressive revelation of Scripture. The full Trinitarian doctrine is not stated explicitly in any single verse of the Bible; it is the theological conclusion required by the accumulated weight of the biblical testimony taken as a whole. The church's task in formulating the doctrine has not been to import philosophical categories from outside Scripture but to draw out the logical implications of what Scripture teaches when its full witness is taken seriously.

The Old Testament, while not explicitly teaching the Trinity, contains hints of intra-divine plurality that the New Testament retroactively illumines. The plural "Us" in the divine deliberation of Genesis 1:26, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness", is not simply a "plural of majesty," as some have argued; the majesty plural does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament in first-person divine speech. The more natural reading, confirmed by the New Testament's identification of the pre-incarnate Son as the agent of creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2), is that the divine deliberation of Genesis 1:26 is a genuine intra-divine consultation within the one divine being who is already, in the Old Testament, more complex in His personal relations than strict monotheism by itself would require.

The New Testament witnesses to the Trinity with a fullness, an explicitness, and a theological confidence that leaves no room for any non-Trinitarian account of the God of the New Testament. Several key passages establish the Trinity with particular force.

A. The Baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16–17)

The baptism of Jesus is the most dramatically explicit Trinitarian scene in the Gospels: the Son stands in the Jordan, the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven with the declaration "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17, NASB 1995). Three distinct Persons, simultaneously present and acting in distinct ways in a single historical event. The Father speaks; He does not descend. The Son is baptized; He does not speak from heaven. The Spirit descends; He does not stand in the water. The distinctions are real, personal, and simultaneous, the Trinity revealed not in theological proposition but in historical event.

B. The Baptismal Formula (Matthew 28:19)

The great commission's baptismal formula, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NASB 1995), is the most concentrated Trinitarian formula in the New Testament. We noted in Lesson 8 that the singular "name" (*onoma*, not *onomata*) governs three Persons, declaring the one divine essence that encompasses and is identical with all three. The formula is Trinitarian in both directions: the unity of the one name guards against tritheism; the three-fold personal specification guards against modalism. It is the formula into whose life every disciple is initiated, and it is the formula spoken by the One whose authority over all heaven and earth (v. 18) is itself the supreme Christological claim.

C. The Apostolic Benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14)

The Apostolic Benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14, NASB 1995), is the Trinitarian blessing of the church in its most liturgically compact and most theologically rich form. Each Person is addressed by name; each Person is associated with a specific dimension of the divine self-giving: grace (the Son), love (the Father), fellowship (the Spirit). The three are coordinate, placed in parallel with the grammatical equality that reflects their ontological equality. And the blessing is addressed from all three together, as the single, unified, inexhaustible source of everything the church needs for its life and ministry.

D. The Prologue of John (John 1:1–3)

John's prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:1–3, NASB 1995), is the most precise and most philosophically sophisticated New Testament declaration of the full deity and genuine personal distinction of the Son. The Word was with God (*pros ton theon*: in eternal personal relationship with, face-to-face with) and the Word was God (*theos* without the definite article: fully, genuinely, qualitatively divine). The distinction and the identity are held with grammatical precision in a single verse, and they constitute the irreducible Christological foundation upon which the entire Gospel of John is built.

IV. The Unity of Essence: One Being, Undivided and Indivisible

One of the most important and most frequently misunderstood aspects of Trinitarian theology is the nature of the divine unity. The unity of God in the doctrine of the Trinity is not the unity of a partnership, a team, or a family, three individuals who are united by common goals, common values, and common commitment. It is the unity of a single, undivided, infinite divine essence that is identically and fully possessed by each of the three Persons.

The classical theological tradition has expressed this through the doctrine of divine simplicity: God is not composed of parts that could in principle be separated. His omniscience is not a part of Him distinct from His holiness; His love is not a part of Him that could in principle exist apart from His justice. God is His attributes, fully and without remainder. And this simplicity means that the divine essence is not divided or distributed

among the three Persons; each Person possesses the entire, undivided divine essence, the same omniscience, the same omnipotence, the same holiness, the same love.

This is why it is theologically precise to say that the Father is omniscient and the Son is omniscient and the Spirit is omniscient, but there is not a committee of three omnisciences; there is the single, undivided omniscience of the one God, possessed by each Person fully. The Father loves the Son (John 3:35); the Son loves the Father (John 14:31); the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14). These are not three instances of love produced by three separate loving beings; they are the single, infinitely rich, eternal love of the one God, expressed within the eternal community of the three Persons.

The unity of the divine essence also grounds the unity of the divine will and the unity of the divine action in the economy of salvation. The works of the Trinity *ad extra* (outside the divine being, in creation and redemption) are the single, undivided work of the one God, even as they are particularly appropriated to specific Persons in relation to their personal properties. The Father creates; the Son creates; the Spirit creates (Genesis 1:2; John 1:3; Psalm 104:30), but there is one act of creation, not three. The Father sends; the Son goes; the Spirit empowers, but the sending, the going, and the empowering are the single, unified, infinitely wise action of the one triune God.

V. The Distinction of Persons: Three Real, Eternal, and Co-Equal Persons

The doctrine of the Trinity insists with equal firmness on the genuine, eternal, real distinction of the three Persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not three names for the same Person, not three phases of a single divine process, and not three modes of the single divine essence without genuine personal differentiation. They are three genuinely distinct “whos” within the single divine “what.”

The distinguishing characteristic of each Person is defined not by some separate attribute or quality that belongs to one but not the others, since all attributes belong to the one essence possessed equally by all three, but by the eternal relationships of origin that distinguish each Person from the others. The Father is unbegotten, He derives His existence from no other; He is the fountal source (*fons divinitatis*) within the eternal Trinitarian life. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father; He receives His existence from the Father in an eternal communication that is not temporal origin or creation but the eternal generation of the Son within the divine being. The Spirit proceeds from the Father (and, in the Western tradition, from the Father and the Son, the filioque) in the eternal procession that distinguishes His mode of subsistence from the generation of the Son. We will examine the eternal relations of origin in detail in Lesson 20.

What must be emphasized here is that the distinction of Persons is genuinely real and genuinely eternal. The Father was not the Father only when He became the Father of the incarnate Son; He is eternally the Father in relation to the eternal Son. The Son was not the Son only when He became incarnate; He is the eternal Son in relation to the eternal Father. The Spirit was not given a personal identity only at Pentecost; He is the eternal Spirit in the eternal life of the triune God. The relations of origin are not temporal

or historical; they are the eternal, necessary, and constitutive relationships within the divine being that make the Father the Father, the Son the Son, and the Spirit the Spirit, from all eternity.

The co-equality of the Persons is affirmed with equal force. The Son is not a lesser God, a junior partner, or a subordinate being. He is “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3, NASB 1995), “in whom all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9, NASB 1995), the One who is “over all, God blessed forever” (Romans 9:5, NASB 1995). The Spirit is not an impersonal divine force; He is the “Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:17), the One who “searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10, NASB 1995), the One whose gifts are given “as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:11, NASB 1995). All three Persons are fully, equally, and co-eternally God.

VI. Why the Trinity Matters: Without It, Everything Collapses

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological luxury, a fascinating puzzle for academic theologians that the ordinary Christian can safely ignore without loss. It is the essential foundation of the entire structure of Christian belief and Christian life, and its loss, whether through outright denial or through the practical Unitarianism of a Christianity that never thinks Trinitarianly, produces damage that extends to every dimension of Christian existence.

A. Without the Trinity, the Atonement Collapses

The atonement requires a God-Man as its agent: the One who stands in the gap between the holy God and the guilty sinner must be fully God (in order to bear an infinite weight of divine wrath and to offer an infinitely sufficient propitiation) and fully human (in order to represent humanity and stand in the place of the guilty). If the Son is not fully God, if Arianism is correct, then the propitiation is insufficient. A creature, however exalted, cannot bear what the infinite holiness of God requires. Only the infinite Son of God, bearing the wrath in His human nature, offers a sacrifice of infinite worth. The Trinitarian identity of the Son is the theological ground of the sufficiency of the atonement.

B. Without the Trinity, the Gospel Evaporates

The gospel is the announcement that the triune God has acted, in the covenant of redemption established within the eternal life of the Trinity, to save sinners: the Father sends the Son; the Son obeys the Father unto death; the Spirit applies the Son’s accomplished redemption to the hearts of the elect. Remove the Trinitarian structure, and what remains? A moral example (if the Son is not fully God, His death is not the divine self-giving that the gospel announces but the heroic sacrifice of a supremely good creature). A legal transaction (if the Spirit is not truly divine, the regeneration and sanctification He produces are not the transforming presence of God but the influence of a divine power-source). The personal, relational, Trinitarian gospel is the only gospel that addresses the full depth of human need.

C. Without the Trinity, the Christian Life Is Unintelligible

The Christian life is, in its very structure, Trinitarian: we are adopted as children of the Father (Galatians 4:4–6), united to the Son by faith (Ephesians 3:17), and indwelt by the Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15–16). Prayer is Trinitarian: we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). Worship is Trinitarian: we offer praise to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit (John 4:24; Philippians 3:3). The entire structure of the Christian's relationship with God is irreducibly Trinitarian, and a non-Trinitarian Christianity is not a simpler or more accessible version of the same thing; it is a different religion.

D. Without the Trinity, the Eternal Hope Is Insecure

The eternal life that the gospel promises is not merely continued creaturely existence of indefinite duration; it is participation in the eternal life of the triune God, the life of perfect love, joy, and mutual indwelling that the Father, Son, and Spirit have shared from all eternity (John 17:24–26). Jesus' high-priestly prayer of John 17, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one" (v. 22, NASB 1995), is the Trinitarian promise that the community of the redeemed will be drawn into the eternal community of the Trinity itself. Without the Trinity, there is no such life to be entered; there is only the extended existence of creatures in the presence of their Creator. The difference is infinite.

VII. The Doxological Response: Worshipping the Triune God

The Trinity is not, in the end, a theological puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be worshipped, the most profound and most glorious of all revealed realities, the truth that stands at the absolute center of Christian existence and that calls forth the most exalted, the most sustained, and the most joyful worship that any creature can render.

The worship of the triune God is the privilege and the practice of the Christian church from its earliest moments. The great doxologies of the New Testament are Trinitarian: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NASB 1995). "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14, NASB 1995). "For through Him (Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18, NASB 1995). The entire structure of New Testament piety is Trinitarian, and the church that worships well is the church that worships Trinitarianly.

The great hymnody of the church has always been driven by the Trinity. The Gloria in Excelsis, "Glory be to God on high", is a Trinitarian hymn in its full form, addressed to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in succession. The Gloria Patri, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit", has concluded the recitation of the Psalms in Christian worship since at least the fourth century. Reginald Heber's hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" is an extended meditation on the trisagion of Isaiah 6 as it is understood through the Trinitarian lens of Revelation 4:8: the thrice-holy God is the Trinity, and the eternal anthem of the seraphim is directed to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who are one God, holy beyond all measure and worthy of all praise.

The doxological response to the Trinity is, in the deepest sense, the response of a creature that has been brought, by the revelation of God in Scripture and the illumination of the Spirit, to the very edge of the most profound mystery in all of reality, the mystery of the one God who is eternally, perfectly, and inexhaustibly three, and that stands there, like the seraphim before the throne, covering its face in the face of infinite holiness and opening its mouth in the inexhaustible anthem of praise. The Trinity is not primarily a problem to be managed; it is a reality to be adored. Augustine, at the end of his fifteen-book *De Trinitate*, was still on his knees, not because he had failed to understand, but because what he had understood led him more deeply into a mystery that no creaturely mind can exhaust and before which the only fitting posture is perpetual, joyful, wondering adoration.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Matthew 28:18–19

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.’”

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.”

Matthew 3:16–17

“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, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

John 1:1–3

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

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.’”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Trinity	The central doctrine of Christian theology: there is one God who eternally exists as three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One divine essence (ousia), three divine Persons (hypostaseis). Not a contradiction (one being in three beings) but the mystery of one “what” in three “whos.” Revealed progressively in Scripture, fully formulated by the church in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD).
Ousia (οὐσία)	Greek philosophical term adopted by Trinitarian theology for the divine “essence” or “being”, what God is. The one ousia is identically and fully possessed by each of the three Persons; it is not divided among them or possessed by each in a third. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) declared the Son to be homoousios (of the same ousia) with the Father, rejecting the Arian homoiousios (of similar ousia).
Hypostasis (ὑπόστασις)	Greek term for a particular, subsisting reality, a “who.” Used in Trinitarian theology for the three divine Persons (hypostaseis): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each hypostasis is genuinely and personally distinct from the others, constituted by its eternal relation of origin (unbegotten, begotten, proceeding) rather than by any separate essence. The Trinitarian formula: one ousia, three hypostaseis.
Tritheism	The error of treating the three Persons of the Trinity as three separate and independent Gods who share a common nature but are numerically distinct beings. Honors the distinction of Persons but compromises the unity of essence. Represented in popular Christianity by language of the Trinity as “three different people” or “a divine family.” Corrected by affirming that each Person possesses the entire, undivided divine essence, not a third of it.
Modalism (Sabellianism)	The error of treating Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three different modes, roles, or manifestations of the single undifferentiated divine Person, without genuine personal distinction in God’s inner life. Named for Sabellius (3rd c.). Condemned as heresy because it cannot account for genuine intratrinitarian relations: the Son praying to the Father, the Father sending the Son, the Spirit proceeding from the Father. Contemporary form: “water/ice/steam” or “a man who is father/husband/son.”
Arianism	The error, named for Arius of Alexandria (ca. 256–336 AD), that the Son is the first and greatest of God’s creatures, a being of supreme dignity, but not of the same essence as the Father (“there was a time when He was not”). Condemned at Nicaea (325 AD) by the affirmation of homoousios. Theologically fatal because a creaturely Son cannot provide an infinitely sufficient atonement for the sins of

	the world. Contemporary forms: Jehovah's Witnesses, certain Unitarianism.
Homoousios (ὁμοούσιος)	Greek: "of the same substance/essence." The theological term affirmed at Nicaea (325 AD) to declare that the Son is of identical divine essence with the Father, not merely similar (homoiousios) but the same. The difference of a single iota (the letter distinguishing homoousios from homoiousios) was recognized by Athanasius and the Nicene fathers as representing the difference between the true God and a supremely exalted creature. The Nicene Creed's homoousios is the theological ground of the sufficiency of the atonement.
Fons Divinitatis	Latin: "the fountain of divinity." The theological designation of the Father as the fontal Person within the eternal Trinity, the one from whom the Son is eternally generated and from whom the Spirit eternally proceeds. The Father's being the fons divinitatis does not imply ontological superiority (the Son and Spirit are fully co-equal God) but indicates the eternal order (taxis) of the relations of origin within the divine being.
Ad Extra / Ad Intra	Latin: "outward" (ad extra) and "inward" (ad intra). The distinction between the works of the Trinity directed outward toward creation (opera ad extra: creation, redemption, providence) and the eternal relations within the divine being itself (opera ad intra: generation of the Son, procession of the Spirit). A fundamental Trinitarian principle: the works of the Trinity ad extra are undivided, all three Persons act together in creation and redemption, even as specific works are appropriated to specific Persons.
Appropriation	The theological principle that, while all works of the Trinity ad extra are undivided (belonging to the one undivided divine action), specific works are particularly associated with specific Persons in accordance with their personal properties: creation is particularly appropriated to the Father, redemption to the Son, sanctification to the Spirit. Appropriation does not mean exclusive operation (the Son also creates; the Father also sanctifies) but particular association based on the personal relations of origin.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe the full orthodox Trinitarian doctrine: one God in three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must believe that the three propositions that constitute the doctrine (there is one God; the Father, Son, and Spirit are each fully God; the Father, Son, and Spirit are genuinely distinct from one another) are all simultaneously and equally true, and that the apparent tension among them is not a contradiction to be resolved but a mystery to be received. We must

understand why each of the three historical errors (tritheism, modalism, Arianism) is genuinely and importantly wrong, not merely technically incorrect, and how each one damages the gospel. And we must believe that the Trinity is not a peripheral or optional doctrine but the essential foundation of Christian theism, the doctrine without which the atonement, the gospel, the Christian life, and the eternal hope all collapse.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The Trinity should produce in us not intellectual frustration at a doctrine we cannot fully comprehend, but doxological wonder at a God who is more glorious, more rich, and more inexhaustibly personal than any creaturely concept of deity could generate on its own. The God who is one in being and three in Person is a God who has never been alone, who is the eternal community of love, who created not from loneliness but from the overflow of the eternal love that the Father and Son and Spirit have shared from all eternity. He is the God who can say “God is love” and mean it in an eternal, non-contingent sense, because love has always been, within the triune life, perfectly and inexhaustibly actual. Let the Trinity be not a theological problem to be managed but a mystery to be adored.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Make your prayer explicitly Trinitarian.** Ephesians 2:18 declares: “through Him (Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” This is the Trinitarian grammar of Christian prayer: through the Son, in the Spirit, to the Father. Practice structuring your personal prayers with this Trinitarian grammar. Address the Father, acknowledge access through the Son, and consciously pray in dependence on the Spirit’s intercession (Romans 8:26–27). Let your prayer life be shaped by the Trinitarian revelation rather than the practical Unitarianism of much contemporary Christianity.
2. **Teach and defend the Trinity clearly against contemporary distortions.** The three historic errors, tritheism, modalism, Arianism, are not merely ancient heresies; they are live temptations in every generation, and their contemporary forms (modalistic pop theology, Jehovah’s Witness Arianism, Social Trinitarian tritheism) are encountered regularly in pastoral and evangelistic ministry. Know the errors well enough to identify them in their contemporary forms, and know the orthodox doctrine well enough to explain clearly what the church has confessed and why it matters.
3. **Use the Trinitarian benedictions of the New Testament in your corporate and personal worship.** The Apostolic Benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14) and the Trinitarian doxologies of the New Testament were designed not merely for academic theology but for the liturgical shaping of the church’s worship. Use them. Let the Gloria Patri be a regular part of your worship, not as an empty liturgical formula but as a conscious, Trinitarian act of praise directed to each Person of the one God.
4. **Connect every gospel proclamation to its Trinitarian foundation.** The gospel is irreducibly Trinitarian: the Father sends, the Son atones, the Spirit applies. Every evangelistic presentation that omits the Trinitarian structure of the gospel

is, to that extent, a truncated presentation. Practice making the Trinitarian logic of the gospel explicit: God the Father, holy and just, whose wrath against sin required a perfect sacrifice; God the Son, who became incarnate to provide that sacrifice and whose deity makes it infinitely sufficient; God the Spirit, who regenerates the sinner and applies the accomplished redemption to the heart.

5. **Read Augustine's *De Trinitate* or another classic Trinitarian text.** The doctrine of the Trinity has generated some of the most profound and most transforming theological writing in the history of the church. Augustine's *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity), completed after thirty years of labor, remains one of the most important and most rewarding theological texts ever written. Gregory of Nazianzus's Theological Orations and Basil of Caesarea's On the Holy Spirit are equally formative. Invest in the deep study of this doctrine, not because it can be exhausted, but because the investment will reward you with an ever-deepening encounter with the God who is the Trinity.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The Trinity may be the most intellectually challenging doctrine you have encountered since coming to faith, and you may wonder whether it is worth the effort of understanding. It is. The God who saved you is the triune God; the love that moved the cross is the eternal love of the Father for the Son, overflowing in grace toward sinners; the Spirit who regenerated you is the eternal Spirit of the living God. You did not come to know a vague spiritual force; you came to know the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Let the Trinity be not an obstacle but an invitation, an invitation into the most profound reality in the universe.

For the one who struggles with the Trinity intellectually: The Trinity is a mystery, genuinely beyond the full comprehension of any finite mind, not because it is irrational but because it is the infinite, self-disclosing truth of the infinite God. The inability to fully comprehend the Trinity is not a failure of intelligence; it is the appropriate creaturely response to the infinite God's self-revelation. Augustine labored for thirty years and at the end confessed: "If you understand it, it is not God." The appropriate response to the limits of comprehension is not abandonment of the doctrine but the deepening of the worship that the mystery calls forth.

For the long-tenured saint: The danger for those who have believed the Trinity for many years is the domestication of the mystery into familiar theological furniture, affirmed without wonder, confessed without adoration. Return to the Trinity with fresh eyes. Read John 17, the high-priestly prayer that draws aside the veil on the eternal love of the Father and the Son and invites the church to participate in it. Let the mystery press upon you again with its original force: the one God in whom you believe is not a solitary, undifferentiated divine monad but the eternal community of the three who are one, and you have been invited, in Christ, to participate in that eternal life.

For the pastor and teacher: Unit 6 on the Trinity is the most important and the most rewarding unit in the entire Theology Proper series. Everything in the series, every attribute studied, every name explored, every prolegomenal question answered, finds its

fullest and most profound theological context in the doctrine of the Trinity. Preach the Trinity. Teach it with patience, with precision, and with the doxological urgency that the most glorious doctrine in Christian theology deserves. And let Augustine's confession be your own: the discovery of the truth of the Trinity is the most rewarding enterprise in which a human mind can engage.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how would you have explained the doctrine of the Trinity to someone who asked? Did you find yourself defaulting to one of the classic analogies (water/ice/steam; a man who is father/husband/son)? How has your understanding of the doctrine, and of why the classic analogies are inadequate, been shaped by this lesson? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Matthew 3:13–17. Identify each of the three Persons of the Trinity and what each one does in this passage. Why is this scene particularly significant as a Trinitarian text? What would a modalist have to say about this scene, and why does the text resist that reading?

3. Read John 1:1–14. What does verse 1 declare about the Word's relationship to God in two successive clauses? What is the theological significance of the difference between "the Word was with God" (pros ton theon) and "the Word was God" (theos)? How does verse 3 contribute to the Christological case? What does verse 14 add to the picture?

4. Read 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Matthew 28:19 together. In what ways do these two texts both affirm the genuine distinction of the three Persons and the unity of the divine being? What does the singular "name" in Matthew 28:19 declare? What does the coordinate structure of 2 Corinthians 13:14 (grace, love, fellowship attributed equally to the three Persons) declare?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the key distinction between the divine "essence" (ousia) and the divine "Persons" (hypostaseis). Why is this distinction crucial for avoiding both tritheism and modalism? What does it mean to say that God is "one 'what' and three 'whos'"?

6. Explain the three historical errors of tritheism, modalism, and Arianism. In what ways does each error honor something true about God? In what ways does each one compromise the full orthodox doctrine? Which of the three errors do you think is most alive in contemporary Christianity, and why?

7. The lesson argues that without the Trinity, the atonement collapses, the gospel evaporates, and the Christian life is unintelligible. Work through each of these three claims. How specifically does the Trinitarian identity of the Son make the atonement

sufficient? How specifically does the Trinitarian structure of redemption make the gospel personal rather than merely transactional?

8. Why is the Council of Nicaea's affirmation of homoousios (the Son is of the same substance as the Father) rather than homoiouosios (of similar substance) so theologically important? What specifically would be lost if the Son were "similar" rather than "same" in essence?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Ephesians 2:18 describes Christian prayer as "access in one Spirit to the Father" through Christ. Is your prayer life explicitly Trinitarian in its structure, or do you tend toward a practical Unitarianism in prayer (addressing "God" generally without the Trinitarian grammar)? What would it look like to pray more consciously as a Trinitarian believer?

10. The lesson argues that the Trinity is not primarily a problem to be managed but a mystery to be adored. What is the difference between those two postures, and which one characterizes your current approach to this doctrine? What would it look like to shift from intellectual management to doxological wonder in your engagement with the Trinity?

11. John 17:22–23 reveals that Jesus prays for His disciples to share in the same unity that He has with the Father, a unity grounded in the Trinitarian life of God. How does the doctrine of the Trinity, the God who is eternally in community, speak into the church's calling to be a community of genuine, deep, self-giving love? What are the Trinitarian foundations of Christian fellowship?

12. As we open Unit 6 on the Holy Trinity, reflect on everything we have studied in Units 1 through 5: the prolegomena, the existence and unity of God, the divine names, the incommunicable and communicable attributes. How does the doctrine of the Trinity provide the ultimate theological context for all of those studies? How does knowing that the God of all those attributes is the triune God deepen the significance of each attribute?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer with the Apostolic Benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14, but pray it as a confession and an address rather than merely a blessing: Lord Jesus Christ, You are the One in whom grace originates and flows, not from Your benevolence as a creature but from Your eternal self-giving as the divine Son. God the Father, You are the One whose love is the fountain of the entire plan of redemption, the One who sent the Son, who delights in the Son, and who has drawn us, in the Son, into the circle of Your eternal love. Holy Spirit, You are the One in whose fellowship we live, the One who unites us to the Son, who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of the Father, and who is even now interceding for us with groanings too deep for words.

Then pray for the understanding that the Trinity requires and the worship that it calls forth. Lord, You are one God, and You are Father, Son, and Spirit. This is beyond our full comprehension, and we acknowledge that. But You have not asked us to fully comprehend You; You have asked us to know You, to love You, and to worship You. Grant us the theological clarity to confess You rightly, the intellectual humility to receive the mystery with faith rather than impatience, and the doxological joy to worship You as the triune God You are, not the God of our theological comfort zones, but the God who is.

Close with the prayer of Jesus in John 17:26: “I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” Pray that the eternal love of the Father for the Son would be the love in which you live, move, and have your being. Pray that the unity of the Trinity would be the model and the motor of the unity of the church. And close with the Gloria Patri, spoken or sung: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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