

Chapter 14: God in Three Persons: The Trinity

How can God be three persons, yet one God?

Explanation and Scriptural Basis (226)

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

- A) The doctrine of the Trinity is progressively revealed in Scripture. (226-231)
 - 1) Partial Revelation in the Old Testament
 - a) Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly found in the OT, several passages suggest or even imply that God exists as more than one person. (Gen. 1:26, 3:22; Isa. 6:8; Ps. 45:6-7; Heb. 1:8; Ps. 110:1; Matt. 22:41-46; Isa. 63:10; Mal. 3:1-2; Hosea 1:7; Isa. 48:16; Prov. 8:22-31)
 - 2) More Complete Revelation of the Trinity in the NT (Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; Jude 20-21)
- B) Three statements summarize the biblical teaching. (231-241)
 - 1) God is three persons.
 - a) The fact that God is three persons means that each person of the Trinity is distinct from the other two persons. (John 1:1-2, 17:24; 1 John 2:1; Heb. 7:25; John 14:26; Rom. 8:27; Matt. 28:19; John 16:7; 1 Cor. 12:4-6)
 - i) The Holy Spirit is a distinct person not just the power of God. (Eph. 4:4-6; John 14:26, 15:26; Rom. 8:26-27; 1 Cor. 2:10; Acts 16:6-7; Acts 8:29; Eph. 4:30)
 - (a) Passages that would not make sense if the Holy Spirit is just the “power of God.” (Luke 4:14; Acts 10:38)
 - (b) What about 2 Cor. 3:17?
 - 2) Each person is fully God.
 - a) God the Father is clearly God.
 - b) The Son is fully God. (John 1:1-4, 20:28, 30-31; Titus 2:13; Rom. 9:5; Isa. 9:6; Col. 2:9)
 - c) The Holy Spirit is also fully God. (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor. 3:16)
 - 3) There is one God. (Deut. 6:4-5; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 45:5-6, 21-22; 1 Tim. 2:5, Rom. 3:30; 1 Cor. 8:6; James 2:19)
 - 4) Simplistic solutions must all deny one strand of biblical teaching.
 - 5) All analogies have shortcomings. Ultimately no analogy adequately teaches about the Trinity, and all are misleading in significant ways.
 - 6) God eternally and necessarily exists as the Trinity. (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; Gen. 1:2; John 17:5, 24)
- C) Errors have come by denying any of the three statements summarizing the biblical teaching. (241-248)
 - 1) Modalism claims that there is one person who appears to us in three different forms (or “modes”). (sometimes call Sabellianism or Modalistic Monarchianism)
 - a) Modalism gains its attractiveness from the desire to emphasize clearly the fact that there is only one God. (John 10:30, 14:9)
 - b) Shortcoming: It must deny the personal relationships within the Trinity and denies the independence of God.

- 2) Arianism denies the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.
 - a) The term *Arianism* derives from fourth century Alexandrian bishop Arius, who taught that God the Son was created.
 - b) Subordinationism held that the Son was eternal and divine, but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes.
 - c) Adoptionism is the view that Jesus lived as an ordinary man until his baptism, but then God “adopted” Jesus as his “Son” and conferred on him supernatural powers.
 - d) The Filioque (“and from the Son”) Clause (John 15:26, 16:7)
 - e) The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity
 - i) Atonement, Justification, Idolatry, Independence and Personality of God, Unity in the Universe
 - 3) Tritheism denies that there is only one God.
- D) What are the distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? (248-256)
- 1) The persons of the Trinity have different primary functions in relating to the world (economy of the Trinity).
 - a) Creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Gen. 1:2)
 - b) Redemption (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:9-10; John 6:38; Heb. 10:5-7; John 14:26, 3:5-8; Rom. 8:13; Acts 1:8)
 - 2) The persons of the Trinity eternally existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Eph. 3:14-15; John 1:1-5; Phil. 2:5-11; Eph. 1:3-4; Rom. 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2; John 3:16-17)
 - a) The only distinction between the members of the Trinity is in the ways they relate to each other and to the creation. (ontological equality but economic subordination)
 - 3) What is the relationship between the three persons and the being of God?
 - a) God’s being is not divided into three equal parts belonging to the three members of the Trinity.
 - b) The personal distinctions in the Trinity are not something added onto God’s real being.
 - c) The persons of the Trinity are not just three different ways of looking at the one being of God.
 - d) There are three distinct persons, and the being of each person is equal to the whole being of God.
 - 4) Can we understand the doctrine of the Trinity?
 - a) Although the doctrine of the Trinity is shrouded in mystery, it is not correct to say that we can understand nothing about the Trinity.
- E) Application (256-257)
- 1) Unity and Diversity in Creation (Gen. 1:27; Eph. 5:31; 1Cor. 11:3; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 2:16, 3:8-10)