



Theology Proper

The study of God.

The importance of Theology Proper to the Christian faith and Church cannot be overstated since this is at the root of all sin: a failure to understand the person of God (1Co 15:34).

1. The Trinity

1.1. Like the discipline under which it falls, the doctrine of the Trinity is also vitally important to the Christian Faith and Church since:

1.1.1. It is impossible to become a Christian without such understanding (Mat 28:19 w/ Mar 16:16)

1.1.2. This was the first major battleground of the Christian Faith and Church (e.g. Council of Nicaea and Nicene Creed, 325 AD)

“Athanasius knew [Council of Nicaea] Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity. In the confession of the Trinity throbs the heart of the Christian religion: every [past/historical] error results from, or upon a deeper reflection may be traced to, a wrong view of this doctrine.” – Herman Bavinck

1.2. That being said, the term "trinity" does not occur in the biblical text. Its origin is instead grounded in the writings of the early Church fathers and controversies of the third century (e.g. Tertullian; Council of Nicaea).

1.3. Its teaching however is completely biblical and necessary to possessing orthodox (saving) Christian Faith. In the sense, then, the term itself becomes both innocuous and convenient since in the words of B.B Warfield, "It is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture."

1.4. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches:

1.4.1. Exclusivity: There is only one true God Who is the Eternal King, Creator and Sustainer of all things. All others are false gods.

1.4.2. Plurality: This one true God exists as three separate/distinct Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1.4.3. Equality: Each person within the Godhead is fully God existing of the same essence, being, substance or nature (as it re: to the Father = Joh 6:27, 20:17; 1Co 8:6, 15:24; Gal 1:1; Eph 5:20, 6:23; Phi 2:11; Col 1:3, 3:17; 1Th 1:1-2; 1Ti 1:2; 2Ti 1:2; Tit 1:4; 1Pe 1:2; 2Pe 1:17; 2Jo 1:3; Jud 1:1 ; as it re: to the Son = Isa 40:3 w/Mat 3:3; Isa 9:6 w/Luk 2:11-12; Joh 1:1-17, 5:18, 20:28; Rom 9:5; Col 1:19, 2:9; Tit 2:13; Heb 1:1-14; 2Pe 1:1; 1Joh 1:1-4; as it re: to the Holy Spirit = Joh 3:5-8 w/1Jo 3:9; Act 5:3-4; 1Co 3:16).

1.4.4. Unity: Each person within the Godhead acts in complete harmony with the others (Joh 5:19, 30, 14:30-31, 16:13-14, 17:1, 5, 10, 21-26).

1.4.5. Indivisibility: Though existing as three separate Persons, God is at the same time, to be understood as One Divine Being (Joh 10:30, 12:45, 14:9 w/Joh 1:18; Gen 6:7, 15:1, 17:1, 26:24, 28:13-15, 35:11, 46:2-3; Exo 6:29, 20:2-3; Lev 26:13; Num 15:41; Isa 43:10-28, 45:5-7; Jam 2:19).

"In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost." - Westminster Divines

"While he proclaims his unity, he distinctly sets it before us as existing in three persons...The Father, Son and Spirit are one God, and yet that the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but that each has his peculiar subsistence." - John Calvin

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

"The Father is God, The Son is God, The Holy Spirit is God, God is the Father, God is the Son, God is the Holy Spirit, The Father is not the Son, The Father is not the Holy Spirit, The Son is not the Father, The Son is not the Holy Spirit, The Holy Spirit is not the Father, The Holy Spirit is not the Son" – Shield of the Trinity (12th cent.)

1.5. The "Three yet One" aspect of God revealed in Scripture is a mystery the Christian must accept. All attempts to reconcile this enigma to our finite understanding end up:

1.5.1. Denying some aspect of the biblical witness:

1.5.1.1. Three-leaf Clover (denial of Equality)

1.5.1.2. Man as a father, as son and a spirit (denial of Plurality).

1.5.2. Introducing destructive heresy to the Church (examples of the two most popular):

1.5.2.1. Modalism

This heresy teaches that God is one person (the Father), who appears in different forms/modes (the Son and Holy Spirit). This heresy has existed since at least the third century when it was called Sabellianism after its teacher Sabellius. The result of such teaching is that all personal relationships within the Godhead are lost (since there is only one person). As such, it makes those passages in Scripture which communicate such relationships nonsensical. God must instead be viewed as a schizophrenic poser and clever ventriloquist (e.g. Mat 3:16-17; Joh 12:28, 14:21-23, 16:13-15). Additionally, this heresy means that it is actually the Father Who was crucified/died for our sins. United Pentecostal Churches (e.g. Landmark Tabernacle, Highlands Ranch Bible Fellowship) are examples of modalism still in existence today.

1.5.2.2. Subordinationism and Arianism

Though there is subordination within the Godhead (the Son submits to the Father, the Holy Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son – Joh 5:19, 30, 8:28, 10:18, 12:50; 14:10, 31, 16:13-15, Luk 22:42; Phi 2:8), this particular heresy uses this word to refer to Christ's (or the Son's) nature as inferior to the Father. Fourth century theologian, Origen held to this heresy but was rejected at the Council of Nicaea. The teachings of Arius (Arianism), also rejected at Nicaea, is similar in its erroneous view of the Godhead. It too views Jesus as a lesser form of God than the Father (*homoiousios v. homoousios*¹). The implications of Jesus not being equal in essence/deity to the Father are several and severe. Not only does it mean we are dealing with a different god (and Jesus – see again Joh 5:18) than the One revealed in the biblical text, but also a violation of the first and second commandment (Exo 20:1-6). Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons are among the religious groups today teaching this heresy.

1.6. One area where we see a clear distinction between the members of the Godhead is as it relates to their roles within redemption and redemptive history. In other words, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all responsible for different aspects of our salvation.

“The distinction between persons is not a difference in being but a difference in relationships” – Wayne Grudem

Those differences are as follows:

1.6.1. The Father is the Creator of all blessings both temporal and eternal. It is Him Who therefore must be appeased if we are to be saved and adopted into the heavenly family. We become His sons and daughters only through our marriage to Jesus (the Son). As such, He is technically, “Father-in-Law” (Joh 14:6 w/17:3; Joh 3:36; Gal 3:26-27; Joh 16:17-27). The Father is also the One Who has determined the number of those who will be elected/called/drawn into marriage covenant relationship w/His Son (Joh 17:1-7).

1.6.2. The Son is the High Priest, Mediator and Curator/Custodian of the Father's salvation, and blessings. Jesus (or the Son) is therefore the One Who atones for sin and appeases the Father's wrath. He is also the Husband with Whom we make marriage covenant. In other words, He is the One to Whom we must come if we are to enter into a saving covenant relationship w/God and receive all of His blessings. As such, He is the covenant-making Member of the Godhead. In similar fashion, He is the acting Head/Chief of the Church, the redemptive community (Heb 7:14-8:2; Act 2:38; 1Ti 1:15-17 w/2:5; Joh 14:6; 2Co 1:20; Eph 5:25-32; Hos 6:7; 1Pe 3:18-20; Joh 8:56-58; Heb 7:1-3; Exo 24:1-8 w/Jud 1:5; 1Co 10:1-9; Luk 22:20; Eph 1:20-23). The Son is also then the One Who grants eternal life to those called/elected/drawn by the Father (Luk 19:10; Joh 6:37-40, 44, 65, 10:28-29, 17:1-7).

1.6.3. The Holy Spirit is the Helper and Conveyor of the Father's salvation and blessings to those in marriage covenant relationship w/ the Son (Joh 14:16-17, 16:7-15; Act 2:38; Rom 8:1-23, Eph 1:13-14). He is also the One Who the Father uses to convict, draw and apply the atoning work of the Son (or Jesus) to those He has called/elected. Additionally, the Spirit grants authority to, and guides the decisions of the redemptive community/Church (Joh 16:7-15, 20:21-23; Act 15:28).

¹ These two words were at the center of the debates at both the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). The former means “of similar nature” whereas the latter, “of the same nature”. It was the position of both Councils that Christ (the Son) being of only a similar nature to the Father did not adequately represent the biblical witness – nor make Him fully God. Hence, it was the latter which was urged for orthodox and adopted into the Nicene Creed (“We believe in...One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God...the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousion*] with the Father...”)