



“Getting to Know God”

Section 1: What Can We Know About Who God Is?



Unit 1.4: Essential Truths of the Trinity

I) Working Through the ‘What’ & ‘Who’ of God

- In our search for a clearer picture of God through the special revelation of Holy Scripture, it is important to note that if we want to know God rightly, we must clarify our perception of God as both a “What” and a “Who.” When we address the “What” aspect of God, this refers to His *substance*, and when we explore the “Who” aspect of God, this refers to His *personhood*. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* is a historical document written in 1646 that uniquely addresses the “What” aspect of God in this memorable statement: **“God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”** *The Baptist Faith & Message*, a more recent statement of faith for Southern Baptists revised in 2000, successfully addresses the “Who” aspect of God in these words: **“The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.”** Together, these statements reflect the substance of God as an eternal spiritual being, and the personhood of God as a Trinity.

II) Traces of a Triune Mystery

- Due to the great mystery of God’s Triune nature, the Trinity has been at best misunderstood and at worst challenged and refuted since the inception of the New Testament Church. But perhaps the single most effective statement that defends the essential truths of the Trinity is found in these words of *The Athanasian Creed* written around 500 AD: **“...we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.”** This Tri-unity of God is something that no one and nothing else in nature can possibly reflect. Below are some heresies that contradict the truth of the Trinity, and also some heretical illustrations that Christians mistakenly use:
 - Modalism:** A 3rd century heresy that taught God is one eternal person who takes on different modes or forms as Father, Son, and Spirit. When we use illustrations of the Trinity being water (a solid, liquid, or gas) or the roles of a man (husband, father, employee) we are guilty of Modalism.
 - Arianism:** A 4th century heresy promoted by an Alexandrian priest named Arius, who taught that Jesus was not eternally God but what the first creation of the Father. When we use illustrations of the sun (star, light, and heat) we are guilty of Arianism.
 - Partialism:** A later heresy that taught the Father, Son, and Spirit were only partially God and each made up 1/3 of God’s total being. When we use illustrations of a 3 leaf clover (3 leaves of one clover) or an egg (the shell, egg white, and yoke) we are guilty of Partialism.

III) Recognizing God’s Unique Roles

- In the three distinct persons of the Trinity, each person has distinctive roles and responsibilities that work together in unison as one Godhead. A simplified way of looking at these roles within the Trinity are that the Father **administers**, the Son **accomplishes**, and the Spirit **applies**. These unique Trinitarian roles are reflected in several key moments of the inspired biblical record, including the following:
 - Creation: (Genesis 1:1-2)** God the Father created the world through God the Son (as further explained in **John 1:1-3** and **Colossians 1:16**) and God the Spirit was also present with the Father and Son as He hovered over the waters at the inception of creation.
 - Baptism of Christ: (Matthew 3:16-17)** In this portrait, we see the incarnated Son coming out of the water, the Spirit descending towards Him like a dove, and the Father giving Him verbal affirmation.
 - Transfiguration: (Luke 9:29, 35)** This passage shows the Spirit glorifying the Son through a dazzling transfigured display, along with another verbal affirmation of the Father for the Son.

IV) The Father Who Administers

- As we look closer at all three members of the Triune Godhead to see how their roles are distinct and yet unified, we begin with God the Father. He is the first person of the Trinity, and as administrator He therefore is the primary *initiator* of the Godhead. In his book, *Our Triune God*, author Philip Ryken highlights how all three members of the Godhead are described in numerous roles in the famous Upper Room discourse during the Last Supper in **John 13-17**. Beginning with the first person of the Trinity, Jesus mentions God the Father 63 times throughout those five chapters, as the passage continually points to the Father as the source of all the Godhead's purposes. He is revealed as the administrator who sends the Son (**14:24**), gives authority to the Son (**13:3**), chooses the elect for the Son to save (**17:2**), answers prayers in the Son's name (**15:16**), sends the Holy Spirit (**14:16**), gives the Son the words to teach the people (**14:24; 15:15**), and is the primary source of love in the Godhead (**16:27**).

V) The Son Who Accomplishes

- Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity, as the eternal Son of God who became flesh to take upon human nature with its demands and necessities in order to earn our righteousness and atone for our sin in an effort to redeem us from eternal damnation. Looking more specifically at the same five chapters of the Upper Room discourse, Ryken points out that Jesus accomplishes the Father's will by revealing the Father to the people (**14:9**), inviting the people to pray to the Father in His name (**16:23**), sending the Spirit along with the Father to the people (**14:16**), bringing the Father's words to the people (**14:24**), and bringing the people directly to the Father (**14:6**). In addition to this passage, the entire gospel itself is a celebration of the work of Christ on our behalf to accomplish eternal salvation through perfect obedience to the Father's will in his life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and eventual second coming (**1 Corinthians 15**).

VI) The Spirit Who Applies

- The Holy Spirit is the third and often most misunderstood person of the Trinity. First, it is important to note that the Spirit is a personal "*He*" and not an impersonal "*it*." He is responsible for applying the truth of God through acts of *inspiration* (revealing divine truth through human writers in Scripture), *regeneration* (awaking people to God's revealed truth), *illumination* (helping the redeemed understand truth), *sanctification* (helping the redeemed apply and be transformed by truth), and *exaltation* (helping the redeemed see Christ as the pinnacle of truth). Throughout biblical history, the Holy Spirit has accomplished this work of application in a progressive way. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was *upon* the people; in the gospels the Spirit was *among* the people; and after the resurrection of Christ in Acts through Revelation, the Spirit is now *indwelling* the people. Finally, Ryken points out the Spirit's unique work in the Upper Room discourse as the Helper who remains with the people of God forever (**14:16-17**), the One who reminds God's people of the Son's words from the Father (**14:25-26; 16:12-15**), and the One who leads the church in continued witness of God's power and truth (**15:26-27; 16:7-11**).

VII) Thinking Trinitarian Thoughts

- So, as we worship and serve God in our daily lives, here are just three ways to think Trinitarian thoughts about the unique roles each member of the Godhead has played in our own redemption:
 - a) **Salvation:** We are chosen by the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit
 - b) **Prayer:** We pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit
 - c) **Sanctification:** We are loved by the Father, united to the Son, and indwelled by the Spirit
 - d) **Mission:** We glorify the Father, by abiding in the Son, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit

VIII) Keeping the Main Things the Plain Things

- Finally, as we get a big picture view of the mystery and majesty of our Triune God, let us heed the wisdom of British scholar Michael Bird who in his book, *Evangelical Theology*, gives us these six essential truths of the Trinity to rest in securely: **(1) The unity of One God in three persons; (2) The eternity of the three persons; (3) The shared and equal deity of the three persons; (4) The shared and equal essence of the three persons; (5) The distinction in roles and relationships of the three persons; and (6) The Trinity will always be an inexpressible mystery.**