

Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Trinity - John 1:1-3

This morning we're taking a pause on our study through Ecclesiastes and turning our attention to systematic theology, or doctrine.

Most of you know that we do this every 6-8 weeks or so.

Deut 6:6: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, might.

Who is God? If we're called to love him we need to know who he is so we need to study that and as elders we're called to teach doctrine.

Titus 1:9 says that an elder must - not optional - must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

As elders we are required not only to know doctrine, but to instruct in doctrine and also rebuke those who teach bad doctrine. Because what God wants is for his people to know clearly and correctly who he is and what he's done. If you don't know good doctrine you can't worship God rightly or live rightly. Doctrine and Christian living go hand in hand.

Systematic theology is just another word for doctrine. It's what the whole Bible has to say about any topic. And pastors and scholars over the years have categorized different topics.

And this morning we're transitioning to a new umbrella of doctrine. We've seen bibliology - the study of the Bible. Theology Proper - the study of God himself. We've studied anthropology - what is man and woman and what did God design us for?

This morning we come to a broad category of theology that covers a lot of things. It's a little bit of a hodgepodge. But generally categorized as the doctrine of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

When we looked at theology proper, we were looking primarily at God as one God. We focused in on the biblical reality there is only 1 God and we unpacked the attributes of God that apply to all 3 persons of the Trinity.

In this umbrella category, we'll talk about Christ - the second person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit - the third person of the Trinity. We'll talk about the Trinity itself. And then there's a whole bunch of other topics that usually get talked about here or under the Theology Proper: Creation, Providence, Miracles, Angels, Demons, so on.

So we're covering a little of everything. We might call it the Trinity and the Spiritual world.

This morning, specifically, we're talking about the doctrine of the Trinity. We've seen the doctrine of God in unity, now we need to look at God in Trinity: there is one God, but 3 persons. That's an important phrase. One God, three persons.

Persons is an important word. Not personalities, not states of being, not 3 gods. Three persons, 1 God.

Why do we study this? Why is it important? This is important because it is the very nature of who God is. If we get God wrong then we're actually worshipping an idol.

If you remember that's what Israel did when they came out of Egypt. Moses is up on Mt Sinai, Aaron is down with the people. And he makes the gold calf. And when he's done he tells Israel "This is Yahweh, who brought you out of Egypt." He doesn't say it's Baal or Molech. He doesn't make up some other story like they were rescued out of Greece or Assyria. No, he gets the name right and the story right, but he changes the nature of God to something God is not. God's not a piece of metal who came out of a fire.

Or in John 8 when the religious leaders are challenging Jesus about who he is. They think they have a really good doctrine of God - they think they know God. Jesus says you don't know anything. Your Father is neither

God nor Abraham, your God is Satan. "If God were your father you would love me." You remember later Jesus says "before Abraham was, what?" I am. And they picked up stones to kill him. What's the problem? They have a misunderstanding of the Trinity.

Who died on the cross for your sins? Was it just a good man showing you how to sacrifice for a good cause? Was it someone who was god-light? A super hero of sorts leading his people? No, it's Jesus, who is God of God, light light, true God from true God, begotten not made consubstantial with the Father as the Nicene Creed says. That's the only Jesus who will save a person.

A lot of people think they know God, think they're worshipping God - but because they reject the Trinity they don't know God at all.

This doctrine is both unique to Christianity and essential to Christianity. It's not a fringe doctrine at all. It is essential for us to understand the nature of God. I think most of our kids from the earliest of days know that God is 3 in 1, but sometimes that's hard to explain. But it is crucial for us to explain and explain well.

Usually when we think about the difference between orthodoxy - correct teaching and herodoxy - wrong teaching - most of the major differences occur in the realm of the Trinity.

The Trinity is what separates us from Islam that thinks Jesus was a prophet, but not God.

The Trinity is what separates us from Mormonism that thinks Jesus was created and became a god, and that we can become a god just like him. In fact, there are millions and millions of gods according to Mormonism.

It separates us from Judaism that thinks Jesus was a false prophet and blasphemed God.

It separates us from Jehovah's Witnesses that believe Jesus is the archangel Michael, not God in any way.

And the Trinity separates us from the average Joe on the street who thinks that Jesus was simply a good teacher, but not really and truly God who is worthy of worship.

It also separates us from those who think the Holy Spirit is some kind of force or emotion or spiritual instinct, rather than a fully divine person to be worshipped along with the Father and Son.

So the Trinity is a major line in the sand theologically, so we need to understand it.

Now, the word Trinity is not in the Bible anywhere. You can look in your concordance and you won't find it anywhere. The word was first coined by church Father, Tertullian, in the 100s or early 200s to be a shorthand for how the Bible talks about God as he exists in 3 persons.

When you ask the average Christian how to describe the Trinity, there can be a lot of ums and uhs and confusion. But the doctrine is really very clear and I think Wayne Grudem in his Systematic Theology does as good of a job as any summing it all up into 3 simple truths. When we say the word Trinity we mean:

1. There is only one God.
2. God eternally exists as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. Each person is fully God.

1. So there is only one God. We've talked about that before in the doctrine of God.

Deut 6:4: Hear O Israel, Yahweh your God, Yahweh is one.

Deut 4:35: To you it was shown that you might know that Yahweh is God and there is no other besides him.

Isa 45:5: I am Yahweh and there is no other, besides me there is no God.

God himself is not aware of any other gods because none exist.

James 2 says even the demons believe that there is only one God.

So there's only one God. Christianity is monotheistic. We don't believe in 3 gods, that would be polytheistic. There is only one God. All the other gods that people believe in and refer to are demons. The gods of the other religion I mentioned earlier: Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, all the rest are all demonic.

2. God eternally exists as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Every part of this is crucial. God **eternally** exists as 3 persons. Meaning that God has always been and will always be Triune. The Son was not made, the Spirit was not made. Before Genesis 1:1 the one God existed in perfect fellowship for all eternity as 3 persons. **Read 1:1-3**

What do we find out here? That in the beginning - before Genesis 1 - there was one God but two persons. We'll get to the third person, the Holy Spirit, in a bit. But here we see 2 eternal persons.

In the beginning - that's before time began. This echoes **Genesis 1:1**. This time before creation we call eternity past. It's forever backwards. And the Father was there and the Word was there. The Word which we find out in **Vs. 14** is the Son of God, the pre-incarnate Jesus.

We have a distinguishing here between the person of the Father and the Word. They are two separate persons, and both are divine. They are not the same person. The Father didn't become the Son then later become the Spirit. That's a heresy called modalism.

No the Father has eternally existed alongside the Son and alongside the Holy Spirit. And here we see that it was the Son - Jesus - explicitly who created all things. **Read 3**

Jesus is the agent of creation. He is the primary person of the Trinity who is actively creating. We can say that the Father created and the Spirit created because they are the one God. Just like we can say an architect, a general contractor and a framer created a house. But it's the framer who is actively constructing a house. In the same way, it's the Son who actively created the universe.

And he did it all himself. Without him, was not anything made that was made. So it's not like the Father made 33% and the Spirit made 33% and Jesus made his share. No, he actively made all things. In fact, nothing was made without his active agency.

The Spirit didn't make anything on his own and the Father didn't make anything on his own. They didn't have side projects. No, it was through the divine work of the Son as the agent of creation that all things came into being. Which also means, the Son was not made. Because nothing was made without the Son.

Col. 1:16: by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him.

Heb 1:2: In these last days he has spoken through his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.

Heb 1:10: you, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

So the Son is the active agent of creation, although it's proper to say that the Father and the Spirit created as well.

Jesus is called God in a number of passages.

Heb 1:8-9 cites Psalm 45:6-7: Your throne, O God, is forever and ever and the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness there for God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

The psalmist says as God, Jesus's throne is forever therefore God will anoint him with gladness.

So this isn't just a NT teaching, this is in the OT as well.

Romans 9:5: speaking of Israel - to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race according to the flesh is the Christ, who is God over all blessed forever amen.

Titus 2:13: we're waiting for the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Col. 1:19: For in him - Jesus - all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Col. 2:9: says that in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily.

That's why we say that Jesus is fully man and fully God, or truly man and truly God. Everything that it is to be God dwells in Jesus to the fullest amount. Jesus isn't God-light. Or somehow a lesser deity than the Father. He is the fullness of God in human flesh.

This is why anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father. Because to deny the full deity of the Son is to deny the Triune nature of God. It's heresy. That word can get thrown around a lot, but to deny the full deity of Jesus is a formal heresy.

1 John 5:20 Says that Jesus is true God and eternal life. So if you reject him you don't know the true God and you don't have eternal life.

And I have to say, there's a lot of Christians who slip here. They'll say the demon god of Islam is the same as who we worship. Not true. If you deny the deity of the Son you deny the Father also.

And the same thing is true with Judaism. There's a lot of people who want to look affectionately to Judaism as though they are really close to us but they're just missing a couple pieces, knuckleheads.

No; Jews do not worship the same god we do. Jesus twice says they worship at the synagogue of Satan in **Revelation 2 and 3**. No, if they reject Jesus they are enemies of Jesus. An accurate view of Jesus has always been a test for true orthodoxy.

Now, I want you to notice something here in John 1. **Read 18**

So here's what John is saying. No one has seen the Father. No one. All the glorious manifestations in the OT of God on his throne? They were all the Son. No one has seen God at any time.

The only God - literally the only-begotten God - that's Jesus, he has made him - the Father known.

So the only way anyone has ever known the Father is through the work of the only-begotten Son. That only begotten Son, except for his time on earth, has always been at the Father's side in glory.

Now, let me stretch your mind for just a minute. What's the difference between the Father and the Son and the Spirit - besides just their names? Is there any difference? Could the Father have been the Son? Could he have been the Spirit? Are there roles random?

And the answer is no. Let me geek out here for a minute. Within the the Trinity - what what we call the Trinity ad intra - within itself, the Father is defined as the unbegotten. The Son is defined as the only-begotten. He is from the Father. He's not made, he has no beginning and has always existed. But as the Nicene Creed says: he exists as begotten from the Father from before all ages.

And the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

And you say, what does it mean to be only-begotten? And the answer is we don't really know. The Bible doesn't define it for us. **Look at 5:25-26. Read**

This is amazing. The Father has life in himself. God doesn't derive life from anyone or anything. God is life, he is the living one who gives life to all else -that's what makes him God.

But what's amazing is that he granted that very same life to the eternal Son. The Son also has life in himself.

And this is where we bump up to the mystery of the Trinity. Because that can sound an awful lot like God gave life to the Son, like God made the Son. But he didn't. The Son has always existed, the Athanasian Creed says that the Son was uncreated. There never was a time when the Son was not. But the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, his eternal life granted to him by the Father.

The Son didn't grant the Father life. The Father granted the Son life. Hasn't the Son always had life? Yes he has. Was he made? No he wasn't. How do we figure that out. We don't.

We're trying to plumb the mysteries of not only an infinite God, but an eternal God and how the 3 persons of the Trinity interact with one another. It shouldn't surprise us that there are mysteries. Not contradictions, but mysteries.

So the Father is unbegotten. The Son is the only begotten. And the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. **Turn to John 14:25-26.** Again, this is a little heady, but it's important for us to have a precise view on the Trinity because this is the nature of the God we worship.

And by now if you're thinking Jason, I could really use an analogy right now. I have no analogies to give you because basically every analogy breaks down and fails at some point. Actually theres a pretty funny YouTube cartoon put out by Lutheran Satire that talks about all the ways analogies about the Trinity fail because they embrace some kind of heresy. So we won't do analogies.

And actually, I'd encourage you parents to not try to teach your kids analogies: egg, yoke, shell, or the clover leaf, ice/water/steam. Because in reality the analogies distort the nature of God. They all get something wrong and basically teach a kind of heresy.

Same thing when explaining the Trinity to unbelievers. Don't use analogies. Tell them we believe in 1 God who eternally exists in 3 persons.

It's okay that we can't fully explain the infinite Triune Godhead. I mean, imagine trying to explain an AI data center to a poodle. Not gonna happen. Well, there's no way we can fully grasp the infinite complex nature of God. The best we can do is simply describe what we see in the Bible.

Here in Jesus's Upper Room discourse - the teaching he gave the disciples the night before he died - he talks a lot about the Spirit. And the Spirit is from the Father and sent in the name of the Son. **Read 25-26**

So the Spirit is sent by the Father in the Name of Jesus. This is why the Spirit is often called the Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit of Christ. Because he comes from the Son just as much as he comes from the Father. **Look at 15:26-27 Read**

Here we see that the Spirit proceeds from the Father but is sent by Jesus.

Now, I know we're on a side note here. But let me give you a side note to that side note. This one verse about the Holy Spirit was the cause that Roman Catholic Church split in 2 almost 1,000 years ago. In 1054 the Church split between Eastern and Western Churches because they were arguing about whether the Spirit came only from the Father or from the Father and the Son.

And although we disagree with our Roman Catholic friends on a lot, they did get this part right. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. And without getting too deep into the weeds, proceeding and sending

the Spirit are sort of flip sides of the same coin. So that saying the Spirit proceeds from the Father, sent by the Son is almost saying the same thing.

Turn to John 20:19-23. Here we also see the connection between Jesus and the disciples. **Read**

This is big. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus breathing on the and now equipped with the Holy Spirit the disciples are able to dole out forgiveness. Now, it's not the disciples themselves, it's their Spirit-powered preaching. But the Spirit is connected to forgiveness of sins. Remember the famous question in the gospels? "Who can forgive sins but?" God alone.

So all that to say, the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

And this also touches on why the Father is the first person of the Trinity, the Son is the second person of the Trinity and the Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. There is a primacy about the role of the Father, the Son seeks to honor and obey the Father, and the Spirit works to glorify both the Father and the Son.

So there's 1 God - that's the first part of our equation.

God eternally exists are 3 persons.

The Father is eternal. Nobody really denies that. We've seen that the Son eternally exists. What about the Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is called the eternal Spirit in **Heb 9:14**. Eternal meaning existing forever. Since only God has existed forever, the Holy Spirit being eternal makes him God.

The Holy Spirit is omnipresent - he exists everywhere. **Psalms 139:7-9** David says where can I go from your Spirit? The Spirit is everywhere present in all of creation, only a attribute that God has.

The Spirit knows all things, even the mind of God the Father according to **1 Cor. 2:10**. No creature can know the mind of God, because God is infinite. But the Spirit is able to know the mind of God because he is infinite.

The Spirit gives life according to **Job 33:4** and he gives eternal life according to **John 3:1-15** and **John 6:63**.

And to simply point out the obvious: he is called the Holy Spirit, he is utterly righteous and other than who we are, a trait only God has.

Let me show you where he is specifically called God. **Turn to Acts 5:1-6**. This is the situation of Ananias and Sapphira. Remember they had sold some land, and gave most of the proceeds to the apostles. That's actually a very generous thing to do. But the problem was that they claimed they gave all the proceeds to the apostles when in fact they had held some back for themselves. **Read 1-6**

So what's the problem? The problem is they lied. Even in their generosity they lied about what they did. **Read 7-11**

So their lie ended up actually being a way in which they tested the Spirit, put the Spirit to the test. And did you see Peter calls the Spirit the Spirit of who? The Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit who proceeds from the Lord Jesus.

Now, before we go, what do we do with all of this? I don't want this to be just a brainy exercise for you where you check all the right boxes and feel good about yourself.

1. Talk to the persons of the Trinity. Jesus thank you for dying for me. Spirit, thank you for raising me from the dead and giving me gifts to serve the Church. Father, thank you for choosing me and being merciful to me.

2. When you read the Bible, read it Trinitarianly. When God is mentioned, is it a specific person in the Trinity at work? Or is it the whole Godhead?

You remember Isaiah's vision of God exalted and the train of his robe filling the Temple with glory? John says that's actually Jesus.

You remember when God led the Israelites out of Egypt? Jude says that was actually Jesus.

The psalmist says God is in the depths of Sheol at the bottom of the ocean. Who heard Jonah when he was praying down there? The Spirit.

So read the Bible Trinitarianly.

3. Hold this doctrine tightly, but humbly. The Trinity is essential. But it should also humble us that we don't know God fully and can't. That's okay. That's good. He's God and we're not. All praise be to him.

Pray