

GODHEAD COURSE

Lesson 3

The Gods of Christianity

From the first two lessons we have established that we can know who God is and that it is an important salvific topic. We also learned that the god of the corrupt woman of Revelation 17 is a mystery and conversely the God of the pure woman is not a mystery.

It is beneficial to understand who is being worshipped in Christianity before discovering the identity of the true God of Heaven.

Until one understands the Trinity, when challenged on the topic, it is very difficult to comprehend a different teaching.

There are three main teachings about the Godhead:

1. Trinity
2. Tri-theism
3. Oneness, or Jesus only

In any discussion, it is important to define the terminology being used. For example, both the Trinity and the Oneness theology are monotheistic beliefs that teach God is one. In this series of studies, we will also discover that God is one. However, we all differ on what we mean by “One God”. It is the same with the terminologies “Son of God” and “Spirit of God.”

Trinity:

The Trinity doctrine states that the One God of the Bible is made up of three Divine Persons as expressed in the Athanasian Creed.

“But this is the catholic [universal] faith: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; Neither confounding the persons; nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father: another of the Son: another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible. So likewise, the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three

Almighties, but one Almighty. So, the Father is God: The Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God; And yet there are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise, the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity, none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another. But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together, and co-equal. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, must thus think of the Trinity.” (The Athanasian Creed as quoted in Philip Schaff’s History of the Christian Church, Volume 3, Section 132, page 690-693)

This creed does contain some Biblical truth. For example:

“The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding”.

The above statement is true. However, the little, unscriptural phrases are enough to poison the whole thing. For example:

*“For there is one person of the Father: **another** of the Son: **another** of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.”*

This statement declares that there are three persons making up the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. It also states that the Holy spirit is not the Father and is not the Son. It is a different person all together.

“So, the Father is God: The Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God; And yet there are not three Gods; but one God.”

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are individually God in their own right, yet the three of them make up one God.

“And in this Trinity, none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another. But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together, and co-equal.”

The Father is not before the Son. They are all co-eternal. If this is so, then the Son could not have been literally begotten of the Father at some stage.

“The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.”

Here it becomes a little more complicated and mysterious. Earlier we read *“none is before or after another. ... co-eternal together.”* Yet in the same creed, we read that Jesus is *“begotten.”* This sounds contradictory. The way this is harmonized is by stating that Jesus is *eternally* begotten:

“The only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.” (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; cf. DS 150)

The “eternally begotten” teaching is at times called the “eternal generation of the Son.” Here is how the theologian Louis Berkhof explains it:

“It is that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like His own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.” (Berkhof on the Eternal Generation of the Son”, Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 94)

Eternal generation of the Son means that the first person of the Trinity, the Father, is eternally and continually (from all eternity and never ceasing) begetting the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, yet without producing two gods. The term “eternal” removes this relationship of Father-Son from the limitations of time and space; there was no beginning, nor will there be an end to the generation or begetting of the Son by the Father. We cannot fully understand it because it is a mystery to the human mind.

The end result is a philosophical and mysterious argument maintaining that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-eternal. Without them being co-eternal, there is no trinity doctrine.

To maintain the trinity philosophy and Christ’s sonship, the idea of eternal generation was created. It permits the biblical teaching that Jesus was

begotten of the Father in the days of eternity” and also supports a doctrine that denies the literal relationship of the Father and the Son.

- Admittedly the mysterious and incomprehensible idea of eternal generation aligns itself to the Biblical truth that Christ is begotten of the Father. The argument does use some correct terminology, but the theology behind the terminology is destructive and faulty. Not all Trinitarians adhere to this teaching. Seeing its lack of logic and scriptural evidence, some, especially Protestants, have adopted other beliefs:
- Some believe that the Second person of the Trinity became the Son of God at the incarnation. He was not the Son of God prior to the incarnation. Being born of God through Mary qualified him to have the title “Son of God” limiting Christ’s sonship to God to his human birth.

In its comment under Acts 13:33, Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible strongly rejects the doctrine of eternal Sonship by stating:

“As God, the person we now know of as Jesus Christ had no beginning, was not begotten, was not a Son, and did not come into being ... but as man and as God’s Son He was not eternal, He did have a beginning, He was begotten, this being the same time Mary had a Son. Therefore, the doctrine of eternal sonship of Jesus Christ is irreconcilable to reason, is unscriptural, and is contradictory to itself.” [Finis Jennings Dake, Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible (Lawrenceville, GA: Dake Bible Sales, 1963) 139 (N.T.).]

Dr. Walter Martin, a well-known theologian and author of a classic book on the cults, has also rejected the doctrine of eternal Sonship:

“The Scripture nowhere calls Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, and He is never called Son at all prior to the incarnation, except in prophetic passages in the Old Testament. The term “Son” itself is a functional term, as is the term “Father” and has no meaning apart from time. ... Many heresies have seized upon the confusion created by the illogical “eternal Sonship” or “eternal generation” theory of Roman Catholic theology, unfortunately carried over to some aspects of Protestant theology. Finally; there cannot be any such thing as eternal Sonship ... the word “Son” definitely suggests inferiority.” [Walter Martin, The Kingdom of the Cults [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985) 117-118.]

The above authors, and many others, have not only rejected the “eternal generation” theory but have gone the extra step which denies the Sonship of Jesus prior to the incarnation.

- Others believe the Second Person of the Trinity has been the Son of God from all eternity, but they add that the Father-Son relationship should be taken in a metaphorical sense, not in a literal sense. In other words, the titles, Father & Son are not real are not literal. They are mere titles reflecting the roles the members of the trinity took to save humanity. The sonship of Christ is a metaphor, not a reality.

“Fourth, a human child comes from its parents through natural birth. In the case of the Godhead, however, the Son proceeded from the Father, not as a divine emanation or through natural birth, but to perform a work of creation and redemption (John 8:42; 16:28). There is no biblical support for the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. The Son came from God but was not generated by Him. Fifth, the father-son image cannot be literally applied to the divine Father-Son relationship within the Godhead. The Son is not the natural, literal Son of the Father. A natural child has a beginning, while within the Godhead the Son is eternal. The term “Son” is used metaphorically when applied to the Godhead. It conveys the ideas of distinction of persons within the Godhead and the equality of nature in the context of an eternal, loving relationship.” Adventist World, November 2015 (“What does the Bible mean when it refers to Jesus as ‘the Son of God’”) also published on the Biblical Research Institute website.
<https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/es/node/1185>

“The Father–Son relationship in the Godhead should be understood in a metaphorical sense, not in a literal sense.” (Max Hatton, Understanding the Trinity, p. 97)

The one thing in common between all these variations of the Trinity doctrine is the consistent denial of the real Father-Son relationship.

To Simplify this, the term “Trinity” refers to **one God** in three persons. As Pope John Paul II defined it:

“The one God whom we worship is a unity of Three Divine Persons, ‘equal in majesty, undivided in splendor, yet one Lord, one God, ever to be adored.’ (Praefatio de SS.ma Trinitate)” (JOHN PAUL II New Orleans;

Saturday, 12 September 1987 also can be viewed on https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870912_cattedrale-new-orleans.pdf)

Pope Francis said:

“On this feast day in which we celebrate God: the mystery of the one God. And this God is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three persons, but God is one! The Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God. But they are not three gods: it is one God in three Persons. It is a mystery that Jesus Christ revealed to us: the Holy Trinity.” Saint Peter's Square Trinity Sunday, 30 May 2021

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210530.html

This definition has spread everywhere within Christendom. Catholics and the majority of Protestants adhere to it. Here are some examples from Protestant churches:

Anglican Church and Methodist Church

The following is listed as number one in the Articles of Faith for both churches:

Anglican Church

“There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

(http://www.churchsociety.org/issues_new/doctrine/39a/iss_doctrine_39A_Arts01-05.asp)

The Methodist church also states the same creed.

(<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-articles-of-religion-of-the-methodist-church>)

Presbyterian Church

“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. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.” (<http://www.presbyterian.org.au/index.php/index-for-wcf/chapter-2-god-and-the-holy-trinity>)

Seventh-day Adventist Church

“There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three, co-eternal Persons.” (SDA Fundamental Beliefs)

“We do not believe in three Gods but one God in three persons. These three personalities participate in one substance. In the divine unity there are three, co-eternal and co-equal persons, who, though distinct, are the one undivided God.” (Reflections, page 9, the Biblical Research Institute for July, 2008. Seventh Day Adventist Church.)

Not all members of these denominations subscribe to the trinity doctrine. Some within these churches reject the trinity and believe in tri-theism.

It is also important to understand that in the Trinitarian teaching, the word “person” does not mean a “being”. Three persons do not equal three beings; that is why they believe there is only one God, not three. Most theologians prefer the term “hypostasis” rather than “person” because it is a word that refers to the theological concept of a person that is half-way between mere personality and an individual being. This concept is explained in the following way:

“The doctrine of a subsistence in the substance of the Godhead brings to view a species of existence that is so anomalous and unique, that the human mind derives little or no aid from those analogies which assist it in all other cases. The hypostasis is a real subsistence, — a solid essential form of existence, and not a mere emanation, or energy, or manifestation, — but it is intermediate between substance and attributes. It is not identical with the substance, for there are not three substances [or beings]. It is not identical with attributes, for the three Persons each and equally possess all the divine attributes... Hence the human mind is called upon to grasp the notion of a species of existence that is totally sui generis, and not capable of illustration by any of the ordinary comparisons and analogies.” (Dr. Shedd, History of Christian Doctrine, vol. 1, p. 365 as quoted in Philip Schaff's History of the Christian Church, Volume 3, Section 130, pages 676, 677)

This strange idea of God is so difficult to understand that even Augustine did not understand it. Augustine was the most influential church writer to define the Trinity, and is widely respected as an authority among Trinitarians. Of him, Philip Schaff wrote:

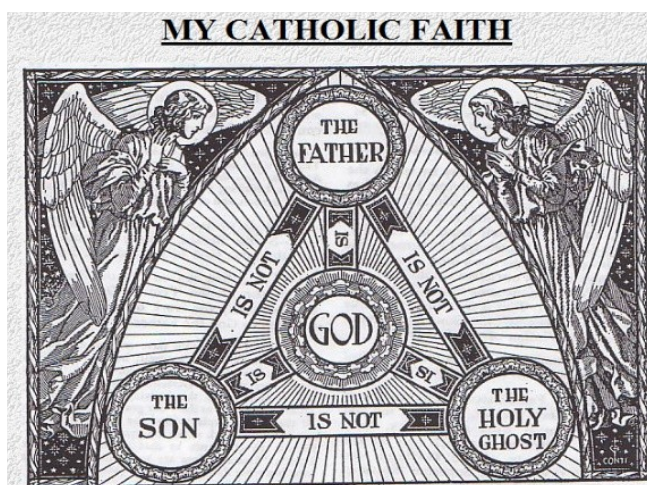
“Of all the fathers, next to Athanasius, Augustine performed the greatest service for this dogma [the Trinity].” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume 3, Section 131, page 684*)

Augustine said, “If we be asked to define the Trinity, we can only say, it is not this or that.” (Augustine, as quoted in Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church, Volume 3, Section 130, page 672*)

Athanasius, one of the earliest and very influential propagators of the Trinity, “has candidly confessed that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate upon the divinity of the Logos, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts.” (Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter 5, paragraph 1, as quoted in Alonzo T. Jones’ *The Two Republics*, page 334)

Athanasius and Augustine, the two men who did more to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity than any other, both admit that they did not understand it and could not define it. This concept of God, as confusing and mysterious as it is, is the most commonly accepted view among Christians.

Here is how the Trinity is illustrated by various churches:



As you can see, the Holy spirit is not the Father and is not the Son.

Each of them is individually God, yet together they make up the one God of the bible.

Tritheism

Another view is “Tritheism.”

Tritheism is the concept that the one Godhead of the Bible is composed of three, separate beings/gods who are one in their nature, goals, plans, and purposes. This concept does not teach one God, rather it teaches one Godhead, which is made up of three gods.

Remember, the Athanasian Creed says, “*Neither confounding the persons; nor dividing the substance.*” The term, “*nor dividing the substance*” has direct reference to what is termed “Tritheism.” According to orthodox Trinitarians, Tritheism divides the substance of God into three, separate Beings, which would be three gods, hence it is labeled Tri-theism. Notice the following definition of the “orthodox Trinity” in which the definition of Tritheism is brought out:

*“... the term person [hypostasis] must not be taken here in the sense current among men, as if the three persons were three different individuals, or three self-conscious and separately acting beings. The trinitarian idea of personality lies midway between that of a mere form of manifestation, or a personation, which would lead to **Sabellianism [also called Modalism]**, and the idea of an independent, limited human personality, which would result in tritheism. In other words, it avoids the ... unitarian Trinity of a threefold conception and aspect of one and the same being, and the ... Tri theistic trinity of three distinct and separate beings.” (Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Volume 3, Section 130, pages 676, 677)*

Tri-theism teaches “one Godhead made up of three separate beings or Gods”, which is a polytheistic theology (multiple gods).

Of course, within tri-theism, none is before or after the other. None was begotten of the other. Hence, the Father/Son relationship is not real. It is a metaphor.

And the Holy spirit is not the Father neither is it the Son. It is a third separate God.

Oneness/Modalism

Another view that is also known, but not as widely accepted, is “Jesus only” or Modalism. This belief teaches that there is one God, a singular, divine Spirit or being, who manifests himself as three modes/manifestation: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The core of this doctrine is that Jesus is the Father, and Jesus is the Spirit. One God reveals Himself in different “modes”. There are no three persons/beings; only one person/being with three manifestations.

Hence, there is no literal Father, or Son because there are no two separate persons or beings. It is the same being appearing in three different forms.

In short:

- The Trinity teaches “one God made up of three persons,” which is a monotheistic theology;
- Tritheism teaches “one Godhead made up of three beings or gods,” which is a polytheistic theology.
- Modalism teaches One being manifesting himself in three different forms, which is a monotheistic theology.

These three beliefs are not the only way to define God within Christendom. There are different theologies however, these are the most known and taught within Christendom.