

DOCTRINE 1

UNIT SIX THE GOD WE KNOW (2): THE TRINITY

INTRODUCTION

- ↪ Many Christians see the doctrine of the Trinity as obscure, irrelevant and not worth worrying about.
- ↪ However, the Church of England declared the doctrine to be central to the Christian Faith.
- ↪ This unit aims to examine and explain the doctrine of the Trinity and its significance.

GOD THE SAVING CREATOR

- ↪ The creeds which underline the importance of the Trinity clearly stress that there is only one God.
- ↪ For humans this is not a natural way to think.
- ↪ It is more natural to think that there is either no God or many competing gods or spirits of varying power.

- ↳ The Lord is the one and only creator.
 - There is a temptation to diminish God and give the universe itself the awe and adoration due to him.
 - Whatever reality we encounter (except God himself) is made by God and belongs to him.

- ↳ Idols have no power at all.
 - Isaiah casts scorn upon idols and those who worship them (chapter 44).
 - Idol-makers take a part of creation and turn it into their god.
 - Humans prefer idols because they create them, rather than being subject to a God who has created us.

- ↳ The Lord is the one and only Saviour.
 - The creator is intimately and lovingly involved with his creation.
 - There is no hint that religion will save, only God can save people.
 - The Lord not only attacks idols, but also forbids images of himself.
 - It took Israel a long time to understand that there was only one God, but by the time of Jesus it was a key Jewish belief.
 - The New Testament speaks not only of the Father, but of "one Lord, Jesus Christ".
 - At various points in the Old Testament some of God's attributes seem to be almost independent.
 - Most prominently, the Spirit of God is referred to in a way that suggests a distinction within God himself.
 - In places, a pattern of "threeness" can be discerned.
 - God raised up a human saviour and empowered him with his Spirit.
 - This is not the doctrine of the Trinity, but lays the groundwork for such an understanding of God.

GOD ENTERS HIS WORLD

- ↳ From the New Testament description, it is clear that Jesus was fully human.
- ↳ It is also made clear that Jesus was more than just a man – John identifies him as the Word of God.
- ↳ John was sure of the humanity of Jesus, but doesn't hold back from identifying him as God as well.
- ↳ The Biblical account can't be properly understood without seeing Jesus as fully God and fully human.
- ↳ Paul refers to Jesus as Lord – this is either blasphemy or the truth.
- ↳ If there is only one God, how can it be true?
- ↳ Thinking of the Holy Spirit gives us the opposite problem.
- ↳ Old Testament readers would think of the Spirit as God, although more like an attribute of God.
- ↳ It is easier to see the Spirit as God, but harder to see him as a separate person.
- ↳ John speaks of the Spirit as 'another counsellor'.
- ↳ All the New Testament evidence shows that the Spirit should be seen as personal, but separate from the Father and Son.
- ↳ Again, if there is only one God, how can this be true?

THE THREE IN ONE

- ↳ The New Testament brings Father, Son and Spirit together in a way that both unites them and distinguishes them from each other.
- ↳ This pattern is seen clearly at the baptism of Jesus.
- ↳ Another very clear reference is in the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19.
- ↳ The language of this verse makes the idea of the Trinity very clear.
- ↳ The unity of God means that we should see all three persons involved in God's works.
- ↳ When Jesus said "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) he did not mean that he was the Father.
- ↳ Jesus meant that the Father and Son could not be divided, and co-operated in their work.
- ↳ Jesus also tells us that the Spirit is sent by the Father at the request of the Son to indwell his disciples.
- ↳ The Spirit is not separate from Father and Son, God indwells us by the Spirit.
- ↳ Jesus also said "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28).
- ↳ As the Son also asks the Father to send the Spirit, these are indications of an order & difference in function.

↳ We must maintain the unity and equality of the three while also recognising an order between them.

↳ The evidence about God forces us to these conclusions:

- There is only one God.
- The Father is God.
- The Son is God.
- The Holy Spirit is God.
- The three are distinct: not just aspects of God.
- The Father is personal.
- The Son is personal.
- The Holy Spirit is personal.
- The three are not separate, but one.
- The three act together in their work.

LANGUAGE THAT HELPS AND HINDERS

↳ It took some time to be able to express the doctrine of the Trinity accurately in words.

- TRINITY: description of God as one in three & three in one.
- PERSON: meant to indicate the distinctiveness of each member of the Trinity without compromising God's unity.
- SUBSTANCE: indicates 'essence' or 'being' - each person is fully and essentially God.
- ETERNAL GENERATION: the relationship between the Father and Son is eternal, there was not a point where the Son was 'born'.
- PROCESSION: the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Spirit – the Spirit proceeds, or is sent, from the Father and the Son.

↳ Some of this language of the Trinity can be seen in the Nicene Creed.

↳ The creed speaks first of the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit.

↳ The Son is affirmed as being eternal and of one substance with the Father, and the Spirit is said to proceed from the Father and Son.

NO THROUGH ROADS

↳ Early Christians had to work out what they did not believe as well as what they did.

↳ Some heresies flourished for a while before people realised they would lead to a 'dead end'.

↳ Two main errors were 'Sabellianism' and 'Arianism'.

↳ Sabellianism saw the three Persons as aspects of God, not accepting a permanent distinction.

↳ This defends the unity of God but does not do justice to the personal reality of Jesus and the Spirit.

↳ Arianism makes Jesus a second God, distinct from the Father.

↳ Both talk about Jesus and quote the Bible, but neither is Christianity.

↳ There are similar heresies today – such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

↳ Many illustrations used to try to explain the Trinity are 'Sabellian'.

↳ It may be better to recognise that there is no accurate illustration to use.