

# The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

LESSON  
THREE

THE DIVERSITY OF THE  
TRINITY



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# The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

## Lesson Three

### The Diversity of the Trinity

With

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## INTRODUCTION

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If you watch a room full of happy toddlers, you can't help but smile. Their curiosity, excitement, burgeoning sense of independence, and many other shared attributes make children this age delightful, even if sometimes challenging. At the same time, each toddler has a unique name and personal characteristics. In fact, all human beings have common attributes that define their humanity. But each person also has a unique name and personal attributes that distinguish him or her from everyone else.

A similar thing is true with the triune God. All three uncreated divine persons have common attributes that define their common deity. And each uncreated divine person also has a unique name and personal characteristics that distinguish him from the others.

This is the third lesson in our series, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity*, and we've entitled it "The Diversity of the Trinity." In this lesson, we'll focus on the individual persons of the Trinity — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and their diverse personal attributes and responsibilities within the Trinity.

In order to see the Trinity's diversity in Scripture, we'll look first at the relationships between the members of the Trinity. Second, we'll look at their differing roles. Let's start with the relationships between the members of the Trinity.

## RELATIONSHIPS

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### Question 1:

**If the Father has authority over the Son and Spirit, what happens if they disagree?**

We've seen that the three members of the Trinity are each eternal and uncreated. There was never a time when any member of the Trinity didn't exist. But the Father's

relationship in the Trinity is unique. The Father is not begotten and doesn't proceed from any of the other members of the Trinity. He has never become incarnate, and the other two members of the Trinity have never sent him to do divine work. What's more, we find many places in Scripture where the Father has authority over the Son and Holy Spirit. So, we might ask, if the Father has authority over the Son and Spirit, what happens if they disagree?

**Dr. Danny Akin**

You know, one of the interesting challenges of Christians is to understand the inner working relationship of the triune God, and there are some things we do know and some things we don't know. Let me share very quickly what we do know. We do know that whatever it is that makes God, God, the Father is all of that, the Son is all of that, and the Spirit is all of that. We also know that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. There's one God, yet they exist in some type of mysterious unity as one God, three persons. Alright. It is also clear in the New Testament particularly, that the Son gladly and joyfully submits to the Father, *and* that the Spirit gladly and joyfully submits both to the Father and to the Son. So then a question, I guess, could be raised theoretically, well, what happens when the Father, the Son and the Spirit are communing with one another and they have a disagreement? I guess the Father always gets his way since he is the one to whom both of them give authority and give... acknowledge authority and give submission. Well, that's wrong thinking because there's no sense in which the Bible ever even remotely intimates that there's a disagreement between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. They are always of one mind. They are always of one will. They are always united in any and every issue including redemption. You think of the doctrine of salvation, and it is the Father who initiated salvation, it is the Son who accomplished our salvation, and it is the Spirit who applies our salvation, and they work in an absolute perfect unity and harmony, not just in that area, but they operate in that way in every area. So, any idea that there's ever a disagreement among the triune God is a ... creation of man's imagination. It is nothing that you can find in God's revealed Word.

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

Well, often when people discuss the nature of the Trinity and the nature of the relationships that exist between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we often will point to Jesus' statements that he came to do the will of the Father and that the Father is the Father and he is the Son, and he is the Son from the Father. And, therefore, we often tend to think about the relationships of God within the Godhead — amongst the persons of the Trinity — as though we're talking about some sort of power hierarchy. I think that's fundamentally the wrong way for us

to think about the nature of the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son apparently, according to Jesus' prayer in John 17, shared a glory together. Jesus calls upon the Father to say, "Father, I want you to glorify me now as I have glorified you." There is some sort of mutuality that exists between the persons of the Godhead. Now, having said that, the Father is still, as the ancient theologians of the church said, "the fountainhead of all divinity." And therefore the Father's priority and precedence is significant. Jesus himself says... Or Paul says about Jesus, that at the end of all things, the Son will present all the kingdoms of the earth to his Father, that the Son came to make us children of the Father. But the Father came to bear, sent his Son to exalt the name of his Son, and give him a name, which is above every name. Even when you think about the Holy Spirit, it's telling to me that Jesus would say to his disciples, "If you sin against the Father it can be forgiven. If you sin against the Son it can be forgiven. But if you sin against the Holy Spirit, it cannot be forgiven." So there is some sort of true and deep mutuality, which does not do away with the distinctions or the notion of the Father's authority. But we could say it, perhaps finally, wrap it up in this sense: The Father's authority is always an authority of love. The Father's authority is an authority that loves the Son, desires the Son to be glorified, just as the Son then desires the Father to be glorified. And finally, if they share a heart of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the idea that there would be a disagreement of wills between the Father, Son, and Spirit becomes kind of comical in one sense because if the Son eternally and the Spirit eternally long to do the will of the Father, and the Father eternally longs to glorify and honor the Son and the Spirit, then essentially, in the life of God there is unanimity of will, a unanimity of love, because a unanimity of being in this fellowship of the Trinity.

### **Question 2:**

**What does it mean when we say that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father?**

Just as the Father's relationship in the Trinity is unique, the Son's relationship is also unique. When discussing the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Bible uses language that tells us that the Father "begat" the Son. This can be confusing, since, in human beings, this language implies that the Son was born just like every other person. But Scriptures like Revelation 5:13, 14 are clear that the Son is eternal. He has always existed. Because of this, theologians frequently say that the Son is "*eternally* begotten" of the Father. What does it mean when we say that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father?

**Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe**

Usually when the New Testament uses the word “God,” it’s usually referring to the first person, and this first person is the Father of his Son. So, when there’s a father, there has to be a child, and in this case it would be the Son. And this relationship goes back to eternity. There was no start in this relationship... And so, the first person is seen, right off the bat, as in relationship to the second person. He’s the what? — eternal source, eternal begetter of the Son, and so we say in the Nicene Creed that the Son is “begotten [of the Father], not made.” So, he’s not a creature. He’s not a creature created out of nothing. He’s a Son begotten of his Father from eternity before all worlds. From the Nicene Creed: “God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten, not made,” and that the Son is of one substance with the Father, and through the Son all things were made, so that the Father, through the Son, made all things.

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

When we speak about God or the Redeemer having the full divine nature, we are actually speaking about one who is God himself, God the Son. The doctrine of eternal generation is, sort of, maybe an obscure doctrine, but it’s one I love, and I think that the Bible teaches it. And in the incarnation, God, who is eternally generating the Son, overshadows Mary at the point that the Holy Spirit conceives in her our human nature... So, everything that relates to our being and our actions as a human, Jesus took to himself. He had a full human nature. We could not be redeemed if he had not assumed our nature. But also mysteriously, at the same time, though he emptied himself of the external manifestation of the glory he had with the Father, he did not empty himself of any of the central attributes of his eternal being as the Son of God. He still was omnipotent. He still was omniscient. He still had immutable holiness. He still had perfect knowledge as the Son of God of why redemption was taking place. And so, all of these things that were a part of his eternal deity, he surrendered none of them.

**Question 3:****What did John mean when he called Jesus the Son of God?**

As we’ve just seen, the person of the Son has historically been described as “begotten, not made,” or “eternally begotten of the Father.” Theologians use these terms to describe the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. God the Son was *never* born from his Father. He is *not* a created person but always existed as the eternal Son of God. In Scripture, we see this most clearly in John’s gospel where John used the

title “Son of God” to describe Jesus. What did John mean when he called Jesus the Son of God?

**Dr. Steven Tsoukalas**

What does John mean by “Son of God” when he applies that to Jesus? Well, in part he means God the Son. You can reverse the nouns. Son of God means God the Son. He shares the very nature of the Father... And indeed, in John 5:18, he was calling God his own Father, “making himself equal with God.” Those are John’s words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — “making himself equal with God” the Father. So, “Son of God” in John means, in part, God the Son, equal with God the Father, a distinct person but equal in nature. And, of course, John also writes in 1:14, “The Word became flesh.” There’s the “became” again. His humanity became in a point in time, and he joined this created humanity, full humanity, with his eternal nature as God the Son, so that, for John — and indeed for the whole New Testament and of course for the whole Bible — Jesus is fully God and fully man, fully God, fully human. That’s what the phrase “Son of God” means in the Gospel of John and throughout the New Testament.

**Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.**

Jesus had many titles, one being the “Son of God.” So when John refers to Jesus as the Son of God, he’s making direct references to the deity of God, or the deity of Jesus. And we see that during that time frame there was concerns. Is Jesus “as a man,” and could he be truly God? So in John’s references, it was specifically pointing to the deity, that Jesus is the Christ, he is the Messiah, the Son of God. The people of that time would have readily understood that reference and the association with God.

**Question 4:**

**What encouragement can we draw from the fact that the Son of God himself is our brother?**

The Scriptures also call *all* believers sons of God. We are united to Christ, the Son of God, so we are brothers and sisters of the Son. We are co-heirs with the Son of every spiritual blessing in the present, and of the new heavens and new earth in the future. So, what encouragement can we draw from the fact that the Son of God himself is our brother?

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

One of the most amazing and staggering and wonderful things about the Christian life is that we are invited into relationship with God as



children with a father. That only happens because we get to be partakers of Jesus' relationship with his Father by faith. We're co-heirs with Christ. He's not ashamed, the book of Hebrews says, to call us brothers... It's really unprecedented when Jesus calls God his Father, and because of his standing before his Father, we get to call him our Father as well. And Jesus even teaches us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." J.I. Packer has said, "It is an amazing thing to be forgiven by God, but an even more amazing thing to be justified by him, and an even more amazing thing still to be adopted by him and called his children."

**Dr. Lynn Cohick**

Paul tells us in Romans 8 that God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son, and so we know where we're going. We are on a journey to look more and more like our brother, if you will, co-heirs with Christ. We are being shaped to look like Jesus. Thus, when we begin this journey of faith, until we are called to the Lord, and then we establish our life in heaven, in the new heavens and new earth, this life that we live now, we can think of it as a journey, and Paul encourages us to run through the tape. So, our eternal life begins now, but it is a life, a life that we walk each and every day having put on Christ, walking with the Spirit, trusting God, knowing that the end is secure, but that we show that confidence each and every day in the wise choices that we make.

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

To the believer, all of God's promises, all of God's grace, all of his mercy and love is given to us in Christ Jesus, so that all of his promises are "yes and amen." We have his Spirit. We have the gift of adoption, our justification. You think of all of the outworking of salvation, all of that is God's love, grace and benevolence towards us as his people. Romans 8 is really important here, that even in the midst of suffering and difficulties as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus, that nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, that all of God's promises are sure, that we are more than conquerors as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus, that we are heirs together with him as we await all of that still to come.

The relationship between the Father and the Son is a great encouragement to believers. Being united to Christ means that we, too, are God's children. And we, too, are heirs of the kingdom! But this relationship isn't the only relationship within the Trinity. As we've seen, Scripture teaches that the Son is begotten from the Father. But, the Spirit's relationship is different. Theologians often describe the Holy Spirit's relationship to the other members of the Trinity using the language of "procession" — the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. This may seem like very strange terminology. It's certainly not terminology that we use every day. So, what does it mean?

When discussing the relationships within the Trinity, the Scriptures never say that the Holy Spirit was begotten. Instead, we read that the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. In theology, this is called “eternal procession,” and it’s unique to God the Holy Spirit. To understand what this means, we need to remember that the Scriptures teach us that the Spirit is uncreated, eternal and personal. This helps us clarify the sense in which the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. Listen to Jesus’ words in John 15:26:

**The Spirit of truth... proceeds from the Father (John 15:26).**

Here, Jesus said that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father using the Greek verb *ekporeuomai* (ἐκπορεύομαι), which can also be translated “goes out” or “goes forth.”

### **Question 5:**

#### **What did the early church councils affirm about the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit?**

Now, the Greek term *ekporeuomai* (ἐκπορεύομαι) doesn’t mean exactly the same thing when said of the Spirit that it means when said of a person. When a child “proceeds” from his or her parents, we know that he or she had a beginning in conception and birth. He or she was *created*. But when we say that the eternal and *uncreated* Holy Spirit “proceeds” from his Father, we do not mean that the Spirit had a beginning. Just like the Father and the Son, the Spirit is eternal, without beginning or end. So, we say that the Holy Spirit *eternally* proceeds from the Father. This is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit’s “eternal procession.” And it affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, understanding this doctrine took many years to develop. Several early church councils, such as the Council of Nicea and the Council of Constantinople, vigorously defended this unique personal attribute of the Holy Spirit. What did the early church councils affirm about the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit?

#### **Dr. Jim Maples**

**The Council of Constantinople in 381 was called to address what is called the Macedonian controversy, named after Macedonias, the bishop of Constantinople in the East, and he had said some troubling things about the Holy Spirit. He said that the Holy Spirit was a created being like an angel and that he was subordinate to the Son. Well, Constantinople condemned Macedonias, and they did something else. They reaffirmed Nicea, but they added to the Nicene Creed words concerning the Holy Spirit. They said he is Lord. He is life-giver. He is to be worshiped as the Father and the Son. And it is this form of the creed that most people today recognize as the Nicene Creed, this combination of Nicea and Constantinople that was finished in 381.**

**Dr. Tim Foster**

The Apostles' Creed was written last of all the creeds in around the sixth or seventh century. What it says about the Holy Spirit is very simple. It says, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," which is exactly what the Nicene Creed said when it was first written at the first ecumenical council in Nicea in 325. All that council said about the Holy Spirit was "I believe in the Holy Spirit" because that council was really concerned to combat Arianism and to try to understand the divinity of the Son of God. But in 381 in Constantinople — modern day Istanbul — the Council of Constantinople met and wrote two-thirds of the Nicene Creed, and in particular, that section, developed that section on the Holy Spirit because questions began to be asked about the Holy Spirit that hadn't been before. And what it said was this: "We believe in the Holy Spirit," then it added, "the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified." Now, that text ascribes divinity to the Holy Spirit in two ways. First, it affords to the Holy Spirit divine status. It says, "You are 'the Lord,'" and "who 'is worshiped and glorified.'" So, Lord, worshiped, glorified — divine status. And second, it ascribes to the Holy Spirit divine attributes. You are "the giver of life," and also the origin of the Spirit within the Godhead. So, you proceed from the Father, the point there being that the Holy Spirit was not created, because if the Spirit was created, he wasn't God. So, just as the Son is begotten of the Father, so the Spirit proceeds from the Father.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit's eternal procession has not remained without controversy. By the sixth century, a dispute had arisen over the exact nature of the Spirit's eternal procession. Some theologians argued that the Spirit only proceeded from the Father, while others strongly insisted that the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. This view is known as the New Testament doctrine of the Spirit's "double procession." Eastern Orthodox theologians reject it, but today, both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians adhere to this latter belief on the basis of several passages of Scripture. For instance, in Romans 8:9, Paul wrote this:

**You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Romans 8:9).**

By calling the Holy Spirit both "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ," Paul implied that the Spirit not only proceeds from God, the Father, but also proceeds from Christ, the Son. Other passages that teach this same doctrine include John 16:13-15; 20:22, and Galatians 4:6.

### Question 6:

## What were the implications of the Council of Toledo for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

In 589 A.D., a church council met in the western city of Toledo, Spain, and among other things, attempted to solidify the doctrine of eternal procession. Here western theologians added the Latin term “*filioque*,” meaning, “and the Son,” to the Nicene Creed of 381 A.D. With this addition, the creed clearly articulates that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” or “spirates” from the Father *and the Son*. What were the implications of the Council of Toledo for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

### Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

The *filioque* clause was a clause that the Western church added very early on to the ecumenical councils to explain the relationship of the Son to the Father, but particularly the Son/Spirit relationship. What they argued in the *filioque* clause — and *filioque* simply means “and from the Son” — they argued that the Father *and the Son* — there’s where the *filioque* comes in — are the persons who then send the Spirit, and they’re trying to do justice to the biblical teaching that the Father sends the Son, yet the Father *and Son* send the Spirit. You think of Pentecost as a good example of this in Acts 2. The exalted Lord Jesus Christ ascends to the right hand of the Father, and from that throne of authority he, with the Father, sends the Spirit. And so, the church was then trying to think of the role relations, the personal relations between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Eastern church — and by Eastern church I mean on the eastern form of the Roman Empire, what we eventually come to identify as the Byzantine Empire — as the Roman Empire split East and West, the eastern portion that was Greek-speaking, what we now know as the Byzantine Empire, rejected the *filioque* clause from the West. Some of the reasons for that were political, and it’s always more complicated, but they were concerned to give the priority in the relations of the triune relations to the Father, and so they said the Father sends the Son, the Father sends the Spirit. In the West, on the basis of Scripture, they said, no, the Father *and Son* send the Spirit. And they were clearly trying to preserve a couple of things. One, they were trying to make sure that there is no subordination within the Godhead in terms of the persons, that Father, Son and Spirit are God-equal. Particularly the Son was the emphasis. And they were also trying to tie the work of the Spirit, the relation of the Spirit to both the Father and the Son, so that the Spirit’s work is christological at its heart. The Spirit’s work is to glorify the Son, the Spirit’s work is to bear witness to the Son, so that in the divine economy or the divine relations of the persons, Father, Son and Spirit work together, but there’s an ordering — Father sends

the Son, Father and Son send the Spirit, and all three together bring about all of God's actions and works for his own glory.

**Dr. Jim Maples**

A council at Toledo in 589, which was attended only by people in the West, made another addition. The word *filioque* was added to the creed. That's Latin for "and the Son." And what they affirmed was the double procession of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit proceeded from the Father *and the Son*. They did this without consulting or seeking any theological input from the churches in the East, and this began a series of disputes that lasted for centuries. And, as most people recognize, I think, today, the division in the church in 1054 actually stem from this ongoing argument. Now, that division didn't just bubble up four centuries later, four and a half centuries later, after sitting dormant. It was an ongoing process, and one of the big disputes during that process was the so-called "Photian schism" in 867. Photius was the patriarchal bishop of Constantinople, again, and Photius came into that position because the emperor deposed Ignatius, who was the bishop of Constantinople, and installed Photius in that place. Well, Photius asked the pope to send some papal legates to a synod in Constantinople to address the iconoclastic controversy, and who would be the rightful bishop in Constantinople. Well, Pope Nicholas turned on him and wanted to reinstate Ignatius, and of course this led to a series of depositions and hateful letters going back and forth, and actually Photius ends up excommunicating the pope, and, you know, there's a lot of bad blood in this. But in an encyclical letter in 867, Photius addresses this intrusion of the West into the affairs of the Eastern churches. And also in that letter, he sets forth his exposition of his objection to the addition of *filioque* to the creed. In fact, many of the bishops in the East say that the West had stolen the creed from their church. Photius sets forth numbers of reasons in there, but primarily in that his exposition of John 15:26, he says, proves that the Spirit proceeds only from the Father, and he said that the double procession really looks like Sabellianism to him. And it is on his work that most of the theologians in the East from that time forward founded their objections to what happened... Many people today would say that the division in the church was a political matter, that it involved the East rejection of the pope's interference in the affairs of the Eastern churches. But the truth is that the big division came over the very issue of the Trinity and this issue of the double procession, or *filioque*, because the last synod in which the East and West mutually met and tried to resolve these issues was the Synod at Ferrara-Florence in 1438. That's when it began. It lasted for almost seven years. But they spent six months discussing the double procession of the Spirit from the Father and Son. They only spent two weeks discussing the issue of the political situation, the papal

intrusion. So, I think it's very clear that the issue that really divides the East and West on this doctrine of the Trinity is this issue of the *filioque*, or the double procession of the Spirit.

### Question 7:

### What practical applications can we draw from the fact that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person from the Father and the Son?

The language of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son may seem very abstract and impractical. However, this doctrine confirms to us the close relationship the Spirit has with the Father and the Son. He is not a separate divine being who acts independently from the Father and Son. He is a distinct person who is inseparable from the persons of the Father and the Son within the divine being of the Trinity. And the Holy Spirit lives in us. We are united to the Holy Spirit. We are royal temples of the Holy Spirit. He makes us more and more holy by pouring into us the power and love of the triune God himself. What practical applications can we draw from the fact that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person from the Father and the Son?

#### Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The fact that the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a distinct, divine person and not just a mode of expression of the one God or a phase of his manifestation is very, very significant for the Christian life. For one thing it means that we are indwelt by a person, not by an impersonal force... There is a *person* who is indwelling us, to whom we may relate, and who is in an everlasting relationship with the Father and the Son. I'm struck, for instance, by the Gospel of Luke in its account of Jesus' baptism. Luke goes out of his way to tell us that when the Holy Spirit comes from heaven and descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, Luke tells us that he came *in bodily form*. Now, just from reading the other gospel accounts, you could have maybe made the argument that this was a visible manifestation, maybe it was a vision, but maybe it wasn't actually something that had substantially happened there. Well, you can't say that after you've read the Gospel of Luke. And one of the great old sixteenth century commentators made the point that the reason that Luke draws attention to the fact that the Holy Spirit came in bodily form is to emphasize that all the persons of the Trinity are there present at the baptism of Jesus and that those persons are not forces or powers. They're persons. God the Father is speaking. God the Son is being baptized. God the Spirit is present in bodily form and manifestation. And the idea is that these three persons relate to one another personally and to us personally. It's all the difference in the world to have a relationship with another person than to feel the power of a force. And so, in the Christian life, the Apostle Paul will tell us in Ephesians 3:14-19, that the person of

the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts by faith, in order to make our hearts to be a suitable habitation for Christ. So the picture is that the person of the Holy Spirit is making our hearts, our lives, the very inmost aspect of our being, to be a place where the Lord Jesus Christ would feel comfortable and at home.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell**

The practical application that we can draw from the distinct fact that the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son has to do with him being the third person of the Godhead, and he is the representative of the Godhead in the world, you know, at this time. When Christ was telling his disciples that he had to leave them, he told them that it was important that he would go away so that the Holy Spirit, our Helper, would come, and that when he would come, not only would he be among us, but he would be in us. And so, the benefit for us as Christians is that we have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and because of his indwelling presence, we obviously have him ... perfected in us. Salvation now indwells us to lead and to guide us, even do the work of conviction in us, when we find ourselves outside of God's will. And along with that, he encourages us. And something else that is of great benefit is to realize, since we do not have the physical presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, we do have the spiritual presence, and we know that Christ's name was Emmanuel, "God with us." Even though he is not with us physically, we do have the representative of the Godhead in the person of the Holy Spirit, and we indeed can still embrace that truth that God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. So, that's very encouraging for us to know that as we continue this journey, this walk of life, we do not do it on our own or alone, but we do have the Helper in the person of the Holy Spirit to assist us.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I think there are a lot of practical implications of the Holy Spirit being different than the Father and different than the Son. One of the things is we often say Jesus is enough, but not even Jesus thought that. Jesus said, "I'm sending another." And there's obviously a reason he was sending another. I think it goes along with the Holy Bible, Holy Spirit thing, to make holy men and women — that the Holy Spirit would be sent to have a holy impact upon our lives. But I think there's something else. I think when we think in terms of Trinity, we think in terms of intimacy because the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Spirit, Spirit loves the Father and on it goes. I think in terms of communication, there's communication within the Trinity. So, just take those two things. If they are intimate, should we be intimate? If they communicate, should we communicate? If they have roles — the Father doesn't do quite the same things as Son, the Son doesn't do

**quite the same thing as the Spirit — if they have roles, should we have organizations, or marriages, or churches where different people have different roles? And then I think there's this sense of purpose. I think the Trinity is a Trinity of purpose. It's heading somewhere for a reason. And I think we ought to be much the same thing, too, if we're going to be again holy as God is holy.**

We've seen in a previous lesson that God's being is "simple"; it cannot be divided. So when we look at the distinctiveness of each person of the Trinity, we should never divide the persons as if they're separate *beings*. God is one eternal essence. Because of this, theologians frequently state that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mysteriously and completely "interpenetrate" each other in one uncreated essence without any division or mixing. This is what theologians refer to as the scriptural doctrine of interpenetration — *perichoresis* in Greek and *circumincessio* in Latin. Scripture illustrates this doctrine in a variety of verses. For instance, in John 14:11, Jesus says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." And, as we read earlier in Romans 8:9, Paul spoke of both "the Spirit of God" and "the Spirit of Christ." The three distinct, uncreated persons mysteriously and completely interpenetrate each other without mixing or confusion.

Now that we've explored the diversity of the Trinity by looking at the relationships between the members of the Trinity, let's turn our attention to their individual roles within the Godhead.

## ROLES

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In every household, each family member is equal in God's sight, since each family member is equally created in God's image. But family members also settle into different roles. Families tend to function well when each person in the family knows what he or she is to do to keep the household running well. It's wonderful to be in a family where each person loves and humbly serves the others.

This is similar to the roles within the Trinity. Each member of the Trinity is fully equal with the others in power and glory, and they each share all the divine attributes. But they also have different roles in their work of creation and salvation. Ultimately, each person of the Trinity eternally loves the other members of the Trinity. And, for believers, this Trinitarian relationship teaches us what it really means to love each other well.

Even though Scripture clearly teaches that all three members of the Trinity are fully God, equal in power and glory, Scripture still distinguishes between the different roles they have in the world. So biblical interpreters have come to understand the Trinity from two different perspectives. They refer to these as the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. This does not mean there are two trinities. It simply helps to distinguish the different roles within the Godhead.



## **Question 8:** **What is the ontological Trinity?**

On the one hand, the word “ontological” refers to being and existence. So, the theological term “ontological Trinity” — also known as the “immanent Trinity” or the “*Trinitas ad intra*” in Latin — has to do with the existence and personal interaction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, apart from their acts of creation and salvation.

On the other hand, the word “economic” refers to the management of a home. So, the theological term “economic Trinity” — also known as the “*Trinitas ad extra*” in Latin — refers to how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact with each other, especially in their management of creation and salvation. We’ll consider both of these perspectives on the Trinity starting with, what is the ontological Trinity?

### **Dr. David Correa, translation**

When we speak of the ontological Trinity, we’re referring to its nature. We refer to the fact that the three persons of the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — are equal in substance, power, and glory. Of course, none of them are superior in this regard. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. We could say it like this: the Father is one hundred percent God; the Son is one hundred percent God; the Holy Spirit is one hundred percent God.

### **Dr. J. Scott Horrell**

Ontological Trinity describes God in himself. The common word is “immanent” Trinity. We think of immanence as God being all-present, all around us, but when it’s used — this language has been in place a long time, so we don’t invent it — the immanent Trinity means God in himself, God as present only to himself... And so, what God is in himself beyond all time and space, before creation, God *ad intra*, God within himself ... the ontological Trinity is what, from Scripture, we derive as to the relations within God himself beyond all creation.

### **Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert**

Theologians make a distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economical Trinity. So, ontology being, “within the being of God,” there are three persons who are coexisting, co-loving within one another. Augustine helped us understand that to an extent, where you have the Father who loves the Son, who is the beloved, and the Holy Spirit who communicates the love between them, and within the very being of God, love is given and received and communicated.

### **Dr. John McKinley**

The ontological Trinity is the same God at work in creation, but God in an inner life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relating to each other eternally. And the manifestation of God at work, the economic

Trinity, is a reflection of God as he is eternally. So, even though we can't chase God down or reach back into history before the universe, we can still know what God always has been and what God always will be apart from relation to us, because there is a consistency between who he is with what he does. So, we only have God as what he does. He speaks to us, he interacts with us, but he is the same God as he always is, so economic Trinity gives us the ontological Trinity, and we know God in himself. We have true knowledge of God. We're not ultimately at a distance from him, because he is true in who he is based on the things that he does.

### **Question 9:** **What is the economic Trinity?**

You'll recall that the word "economic" refers to the management of a home. In the "economic Trinity" the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exercise different roles, especially in their management of creation and salvation. So, in the economic Trinity, each person clearly has different responsibilities and even different authority. What is the economic Trinity?

#### **Dr. David Correa, translation**

It's important to recognize the difference between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. This is a very useful distinction that theologians have made, and it helps us avoid a lot of confusion when we study the doctrine of the Trinity... When it comes to their roles, the division of roles, then we're talking about the economic Trinity. We mean with this that the Bible teaches us that despite the three being equal, as we've said, in substance, power and glory, when it comes to their various jobs or roles, we see in Scripture that the Father is the one who has the role ... in salvation, as the one who chooses to save. The Son is the one who performs the work of redemption by dying for us, and the Holy Spirit is he who applies the work of redemption. When we talk about the economic Trinity, we see there is also the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Holy Spirit to the Son and to the Father. That does not mean that the Son is less than the Father in the ontological sense, or the Holy Spirit is lower in that sense, but by mutual agreement, we could say that they willingly submit to the authority of the Father.

#### **Dr. J. Scott Horrell**

What we know of God is revealed through salvation history and through creation. I take it even heavenly images, as well as all that is revealed in the Scripture, is a form of what we call the "economic Trinity" — God revealed to us. And so, there we see fairly distinct

roles of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1:3-14 talk about how the Father declares and predestines, and yet it's through the Son that we are brought into, now, a relationship with God, and the Spirit then comes in and seals us and indwells us — not in that particular passage but elsewhere. So, the economic Trinity is how God has revealed himself in finite ways, in distinct but not exclusive functions or roles to us as creation. I think even to angels, to be honest. But so, we look at all of this in the Scriptures, the kind of preeminence of the Father, and we are united to the Father through the Son, and the Spirit then becomes... God, he comes into us at regeneration, he indwells us. It is God *in* us. And so, we think typically of the Spirit of God in us, leading us, convicting us, illumining us, and so forth, and so we seek to pray in the Spirit. And yet, Jesus is our Mediator, our High Priest, our perfect sacrifice. Technically, he's at the right hand of God the Father, and so he's in heaven as the Father himself. In the book of Revelation we see the One on the throne and then comes forth the Lamb as one who has been slain, and you have this throne of God and the Lamb. So, you have these scenarios in Scripture that speak of distinct functions and roles.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

In terms of the economical Trinity, that's where we think about the roles that the various persons of the Trinity play. So, in places like 1 Corinthians 11, it speaks about how the Son subordinates himself in his role to the Father. And similarly, the Holy Spirit plays a role in which he does not seek to glorify himself, Jesus said in the Farewell Discourse, but actually to glorify the Father and the Son. And so, you see them each playing a different function but remaining one in their ontological relationship.

**Dr. John McKinley**

Theologians have two terms to talk about God's life in himself and his life in relation to creation. And so, we have, ontological Trinity and economic Trinity are two ways of talking about who God is and what he does. So, the economic Trinity is God at work, it is God's involvement in the creation, and it's a term that is trying to explain what we know of God based on things that he does. So, we know that there are three who are God because in creation we have the Father who sends the Son and the Son who sends the Spirit, and they are at work in these different ways in our lives and in creation.

**Question 10:****Why is it important to distinguish between the ontological and economic Trinity?**

This distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity is important because it helps us understand how it is the three persons are fully God and equal to each other but still have differing roles in creation and salvation. For instance, in John 6:38, Jesus says that he will only do the will of the Father, and in John 14:26, Jesus says that he will send the Spirit in his own name to reveal his teachings to his apostles. In these verses, one person of the Trinity follows the direction of another person of the Trinity. How can this be if all three persons are fully equal? The economic Trinity helps us understand these teachings in Scripture. Why is it important to distinguish between the ontological and economic Trinity?

**Dr. Bruce Little**

One might ask the question, well, why do we talk about ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity? There's only one Trinity. How should we talk about it in two different ways? Well, we need to talk about it in two different ways simply because we have a couple of statements by Jesus that raise some questions. For example, Jesus says in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Now, they clearly understood what Jesus was saying, for, in fact, they take up stones to stone him. And when he says, "Why?" They said, "Because you, being a man, make yourself God." So they clearly understood, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." But now later, and I believe it's in John 14:28, Jesus says, "The Father is greater than I." Now, that's perplexing, and the way we talk about that is, we talk about the first statement as referencing the ontological Trinity and the second what we call the "economic" or the functional Trinity. So, when we look at the Trinity, we have a word; we use "God," and we have to use it two different ways. There's the concept of God when we talk about persons, and there's a sense of God-ness when we talk about his nature. So, the ontological Trinity is focusing on the nature of God, his essence, or as the folks in Nicea said, his "*ousia*," so that there is only one nature, and the Father and the Word and the Spirit all share the same nature. So we say, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. That's ontological. It has to do with the nature of being. Now, the economic Trinity has to do with function and resides in the person. So you can have the same nature, but the different persons function differently. Now, I would argue they function differently based upon the properties that they have. So, the Son can say, "the Father is greater than I" only in function, in that the Father sends the Son. So, that makes, in that sense, functionally, the Father greater than the Son. And when we do this, then you see, we set a pattern for all of reality, where we make a distinction within the Trinity. We

differentiate between the persons. Now, if they were all God, and they didn't have persons and different functions, we'd have no way to distinguish them. They would just kind of be a glob, but no person. And you see that becomes a wonderful pattern for all of creation. You and I are human beings, so we share the same ontological oneness, but we're different because we're different persons, and so we function differently, and we can distinguish one as distinguished one from another. So, this idea of ontological Trinity and economic Trinity is very important as it helps us to understand how could Jesus say in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one," and then in John 14:28, "The Father is greater than I." It's wonderfully explained just by understanding the difference between economic Trinity and ontological Trinity.

**Dr. Tim Foster**

When we come to understand the Trinity, we need to make an important distinction. We need to understand that God expresses himself in his salvation activity, in the economy of salvation, and that's what we call the "economic Trinity." But then there is God in himself, God as he is in his being, which we call the "ontological Trinity." Sometimes they call it the "Trinity *ad extra*" and the "Trinity *ad intra*." And that's very important because as the ontological Trinity acts in salvation, most notably in the sending of the Son, the Son, in becoming incarnate, relates in a particular way to the Father that's not necessarily reflecting how he relates to the Father in the ontological Trinity. In the same way, when we read the Scriptures, we need to be careful to see, are they talking about how the Godhead is working in salvation — the economic Trinity — or is it talking about God as he is in himself — the ontological Trinity? That's very important when it comes to thinking about the Trinity and this question of authority within the Trinity. Now, St. Augustine said the rule of the catholic faith is this: when the Scriptures say of the Son that he is less than the Father, the Scriptures mean in respect to the assumption of humanity — that is, the economic Trinity — but when the Scriptures point out that he is equal, they are understood in respect to his deity — that is, the ontological Trinity. So, what Augustine is saying is, any sense of subordination of the Son to the Father is only the case when Jesus, when the second person of the Trinity, has become human, but when it's speaking about the equality, well that's true of God ontologically... Then there's the question of the will. It's very important, lest we fall into heresy, that we recognize that each member of the Godhead has his own will. To say that there's only one will within the Godhead is heresy. But, the will of each person in the Godhead is perfectly in accord with the other; such is the nature of God in his oneness, because always, when we're talking about the Trinity, we're trying to protect the oneness of

God and the distinctions of the person. In order to protect the distinctions of the persons, we want to say they each have their own will. But in order to protect the oneness of God, we want to say that the will of the Son is the same as the will of the Father is the same as the will of the Spirit. And so, there can never be a time when the Father wills one thing, the Son another and the Spirit another, and the Son and the Spirit have to come in line begrudgingly with the Father. That's not the nature of a monotheistic God.

### Question 11:

**Is there a gap between the economic Trinity as he reveals himself to us and the ontological Trinity?**

The distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity can raise an important question. Could it ever be that what God has revealed of himself in the economic Trinity is not true of the ontological Trinity? In other words, is there a gap between the economic Trinity as he reveals himself to us and the ontological Trinity?

#### **Dr. Daniel Treier**

The distinction between the economic and the immanent or ontological Trinity is the distinction that corresponds to the early church's distinction between theology proper and economy, between God in himself, and what we can say about God in himself apart from creation, and God engaged with his creation, God administering his purposes in the world that he has made. This distinction has seemed to some modern theologians to have some potential pitfalls, particularly the possibility of creating a "hidden" God, some kind of gap between the economic Trinity that we see through God's revelation in the world and the immanent or ontological Trinity, God as he actually is in himself. What if there's a gap in there? God might seem to be benevolent toward us in Jesus Christ in the economic Trinity, but actually not be benevolently disposed to us in the immanent or ontological Trinity. So, is there a hidden God created by this apparent gap? The result is Rahner's rule, named after the famous German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who said the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa. There's no gap. If it really is divine revelation, then it is revelation of the true God. So, if it's the economic Trinity that we're talking about, if it's the revelation of the Trinity, then that just does correspond to the ontological Trinity. God reveals in his redeeming work in the world in Jesus Christ who God *is* in himself. We don't want to have a gap that creates a hidden God... If we look at what the Bible teaches about creation, God creates out of nothing by speaking. Creation is not a necessary emanation from God's being. Creation is a free, loving,

divine decision that God speaks into execution, and that establishes God's freedom from the world God has made. So, yes, if it's revelation, it's the ontological Trinity that's being truly revealed, but God didn't have to reveal himself. God lovingly chose to reveal himself through creation and redemption to the world he has made.

**Dr. J. Scott Horrell**

Many have divided between how God reveals himself in salvation history, sometimes called the “economic Trinity” — I try to tell students, God spending forth his revelation into finite creation — and yet the immanent or ontological Trinity, God in himself outside of all creation, outside of time and space, you might say, before, but also in his transcendent otherness. What's the difference? Well, one is how we know God. All that we know of God comes through finite creation, through his revelation in salvation history. That is the economic Trinity. And so the Father decrees and the Son comes into this world and assumes a human nature, and the Holy Spirit comes in a special, particular way at Pentecost but was always there as well. But Father, Son and Holy Spirit revealing themselves in very different ways, and one might say very ordered ways, one might even say hierarchical ways, as the Son, when he's conquered all things, 1 Corinthians 15, then lays it all down at the feet of the Father, as Paul writes, so that God might be all in all. Well, what does that mean? Certainly, we see in Scripture, then, even in the book of Revelation, we see God as Father sitting on the throne in Revelation 4, then the Lamb who was slain, Revelation 5, and all the throngs of heaven worshipping the Lamb who was slain. So, we have God and the Lamb through the rest of the book of Revelation. We have God revealing himself to all creation in a very particular order, and so we are to, as Jesus said, pray to the Father but ask in his name, and doing so, as we learn in the New Testament, through the Holy Spirit as the Spirit guides us, and the Spirit is our intercessor, Jesus as well is our mediator to the Father. So, there's a particular order, which God has revealed, and he invites us to worship him in that sense. And yet, as we think about what is this God like beyond all the categories of creation and beyond salvation history, beyond the Son assuming him in nature and being obedient and dying on the cross and resurrecting, what was the Son like in all eternity? What is the Son like, in one sense, now, beyond all forms or categories that we can understand? So, the ontological, or immanent Trinity is how we think of God, in himself, outside of all creation. And so the great debate, really, over the last 40 years especially, though it courses down through Christian history, is how do those two relate? To what extent does the way the Father, Son or Holy Spirit reveal themselves in this world directly reflect the eternal relationships in the Godhead? And, if nothing else — I think there is more — but all Christian faith has said there is a sense in which,

**again, the Son is always the Son, though we don't know all that would be outside of creation, but he's always the Son in what the patristic fathers said is the begottenness of the Son in relation to the Father. The Father is not begotten, the Son is. The Spirit spirates in some way and is distinct, though again, how you define that in God himself is beyond our categories, but there is distinction always, even in the infinite eternal God we call the ontological Trinity.**

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the diversity of the Trinity, we first looked at the relationships between the members of the Trinity. We saw that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. Second, we considered the differing roles of the persons of the Trinity, as described in Scripture, by looking at the important distinction between the economic and ontological perspectives on the Trinity.

Some of the issues described in this lesson may seem mysterious and inapplicable to daily life. Does it really matter in our daily life whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father only or from the Father and the Son? Will your Christian life be hurt if you can't articulate the difference between the economic and ontological Trinity? It can be tempting to answer "no" to these questions. But even though these issues are sometimes very technical, they also help us safeguard the purity of Trinitarian doctrine. They help us see that the three persons of the Trinity are indeed distinct but inseparable persons in the one Godhead. And they help us see that even though the three persons of the Trinity are equal in power and glory, they still differ in roles and may even submit to each other out of love. Yes, it is a mystery, but a mystery well worth exploring as we grow in the knowledge of our great triune God.



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