

“What is God Like? - Part 2

The Trinity is a mystery ... man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestation, but unintelligible in its essential nature ... The real difficulty lies in the relation in which the persons in the Godhead stand to the divine essence and to one another; and this is a difficulty which the Church cannot remove, but only try to reduce to its proper proportion by a proper definition of terms. It has never tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off.

Louis Berkhof *Systematic Theology*

Going deeper and being clear about the attributes of God.

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God's character.

1 John 1:5 *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

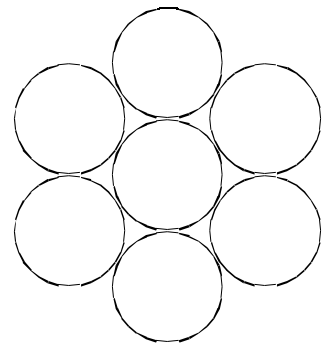
1 John 4:8 *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is God himself who is light, and it is God himself who is also love. We would not want to say that these attributes are only characteristic of some part of God, but rather that they are characteristic of God himself and therefore characteristic of all of God. These considerations indicate that we should not think of God as some kind of collection of various attributes added together.

God's being is not a collection of diverse attributes added together

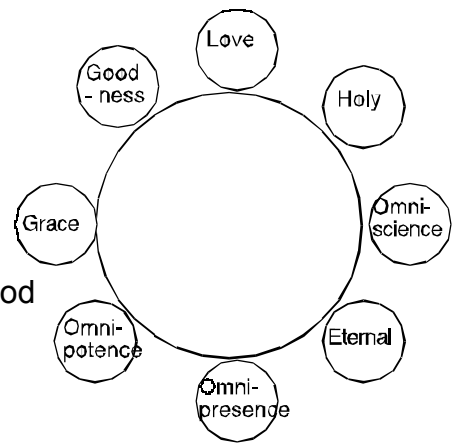
In the drawing to the right, each circle represents an attribute of God.

However, this is an inaccurate description of God because it depicts him as being a loose collection of characteristics.

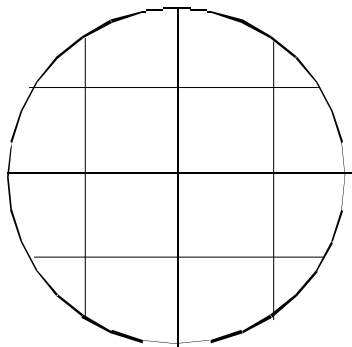


God's attributes are not additions To his real being

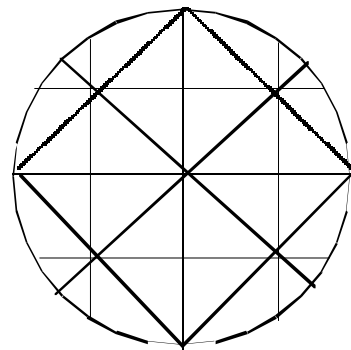
Nor should we think of the attributes of God as something external from God's real being or real self, something added on to who God really is, after the analogy of the following figure. God's whole being includes all of his attributes: he is entirely loving, entirely merciful, entirely just, and so forth. Every attribute of God that we find in Scripture is true of all of God's being, and we therefore every attribute of God also qualifies every other attribute.



GOD'S LOVE AND JUSTICE



GOD'S LOVE, JUSTICE, HOLINESS, AND WISDOM



The horizontal lines represent the attribute of love, and the vertical lines represent the aspect of God's justice. The diagonal lines going from upper left to lower right as represent God's holiness and the diagonal lines going from upper right to lower left as represent God's wisdom. We could go on with different sorts of lines for each of the different attributes of God. But each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's **total character or being**. God himself is a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in all of these attributes.

In terms of practical application, this means that we should never think, for example, that God is a loving God at one point in history and a just or wrathful God at another point in history. He is the same God always, and everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes. It is not accurate to say, as some have said, that God is a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament. God is and always has been infinitely just and infinitely loving as well, and everything he does in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is completely consistent with both of those attributes. Grudem, Systematic Theology

In the Bible God not only reveals his many divine attributes but also his uniquely tri-une nature.

It is important to remember the doctrine of the Trinity in connection with the study of God's attributes. When we think of God as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and so forth, we may have a tendency to think only of God the Father in connection with these attributes. But the biblical teaching on the Trinity tells us that all of God's attributes are true of all three persons, for each is fully God. Thus, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are also eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, infinitely wise, infinitely holy, infinitely loving, omniscient, and so forth.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. To study the Bible's teachings on the Trinity gives us great insight into the question that is at the center of all of our seeking after God: What is God like in himself? Here we learn that in himself, in his very being, God exists in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet he is one God.

A. The Doctrine of the Trinity Is Progressively Revealed in Scripture

1. Partial Revelation in the Old Testament.

The word *trinity* is never found in the Bible, though the idea represented by the word is taught in many places. The word *trinity* means "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness." It is used to summarize the teaching of Scripture that God is three persons yet one God. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, several passages suggest or even imply that God exists as more than one person.

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man [a] in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Psalms 110:1 The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

Isaiah 48:16-17

16 Draw near to me, hear this:

from the beginning I have not spoken in secret,
from the time it came to be I have been there."

And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit.

17 Thus says the Lord,

your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:

"I am the Lord your God,

who teaches you to profit,

who leads you in the way you should go.

2. More Complete Revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament.

When Jesus was baptized, "the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" ' (Matt. 3:16–17). At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he tells the disciples that they should go "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Similarly, the last verse of 2 Corinthians is trinitarian: "The grace of the *Lord Jesus Christ* and the love of

God and the fellowship of the *Holy Spirit* be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). We see the three persons mentioned separately in Ephesians 4:4–6 as well: “There is one body and one *Spirit* just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one *Lord* one faith, one baptism, one *God and Father* of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

B. Three Statements Summarize the Biblical Teaching

1. God Is Three Persons. The fact that God is three persons means that the Father is not the Son; they are distinct persons. It also means that the Father is not the Holy Spirit, but that they are distinct persons. And it means that the Son is not the Holy Spirit.

2. Each Person Is Fully God. In addition to the fact that all three persons are distinct, the abundant testimony of Scripture is that each person is fully God as well.

First, ***God the Father is clearly God.*** This is evident from the first verse of the Bible, where God created the heaven and the earth.

Next, ***the Son is fully God.*** John 1:1-3 & 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:18 No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. John 20:28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Next, ***the Holy Spirit is also fully God.*** Acts 5:3-4 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

Once we understand God the Father and God the Son to be fully God, then the trinitarian expressions in verses like Matthew 28:19 (“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”) assume significance for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because they show that the Holy Spirit is classified on an equal level with the Father and the Son.

3. There Is One God.

James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.

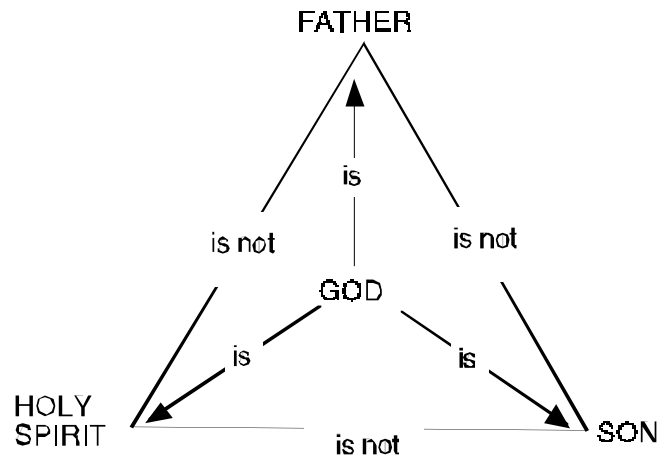
Isa. 45:21–22; cf. 44:6–8

There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none besides me.

“Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.”

Paul affirms that “God is one” (Rom. 3:30), and that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6).

Scripture is clear that there is one and only one God. The three different persons of the Trinity are one not only in purpose and in agreement on what they think, but they are one in essence, one in their essential nature. In other words, God is only one being. There are not three Gods. There is only one God. Deut. 6:4–5 (NIV): “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, *the LORD is one*. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”



The doctrine of the trinity may be hard to comprehend but it is not contradictory. If we said God is one God in the same way that he is three - that would be contradictory. The doctrine tells us that God exists as three persons with one indivisible essence. He is triune.

The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Is it really essential to hold to the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit? Yes it is, for this teaching has implications for the very heart of the Christian faith. First, the atonement is at stake. If Jesus is merely a created being, and not fully God, then it is hard to see how he, a creature, could bear the full wrath of God against all of our sins. Could any creature, no matter how great, really save us? Second, justification by faith alone is threatened if we deny the full deity of the Son. If Jesus is not fully God, we would rightly doubt whether we can really trust him to save us completely. Could we really depend on any creature fully for our salvation? Third, if Jesus is not infinite God, should we pray to him or worship him? Who but an infinite, omniscient God could hear and respond to all the prayers of all God’s people? And who but God himself is worthy of worship? Indeed, if Jesus is merely a creature, no matter how great, it would be idolatry to worship him—yet the New Testament commands us to do so (Phil. 2:9–11; Rev. 5:12–14). Fourth, if someone teaches that Christ was a created being but nonetheless one who saved us, then this teaching wrongly begins to attribute credit for salvation to a creature and not to God himself. But this wrongfully exalts the creature rather than the Creator, something Scripture never allows us to do. Fifth, the independence and personal nature of God are at stake: If there is no Trinity, then there were no interpersonal relationships within the being of God before creation, and, without personal relationships, it is difficult to see how God could be genuinely personal or be without the need for a creation to relate to. Sixth, the unity of the universe is at stake: If there is not perfect plurality and perfect unity in God himself, then we have no basis for thinking there can be any ultimate unity among the diverse elements of the universe either. Clearly, in the doctrine of the Trinity, the heart of the Christian faith is at stake. Herman Bavinck says that “Athanasius understood better than any of his contemporaries that Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity.” He adds, “In the confession of the Trinity throbs the heart of the Christian religion: every error results from, or upon deeper reflection may be traced to, a wrong view of this doctrine.”³¹

What Are the Distinctions Between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

The Persons of the Trinity Have Different Primary Functions in Relating to the World.

When Scripture discusses the way in which God relates to the world, both in creation and in redemption, the persons of the Trinity are said to have different functions or primary activities. Sometimes this has been called the “economy of the Trinity,” using *economy* in an old sense meaning “ordering of activities.” (In this sense, people used to speak of the “economy of a household” or “home economics,” meaning not just the financial affairs of a household, but all of the “ordering of activities” within the household.) The “economy of the Trinity” means the different ways the three persons act as they relate to the world and (as we shall see in the next section) to each other for all eternity.

We see these different functions in the work of creation. God the Father spoke the creative words to bring the universe into being. But it was God the Son, the eternal Word of God, who carried out these creative decrees. “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). Moreover, “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16; see also Ps. 33:6, 9; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2). The Holy Spirit was active as well in a different way, in “moving” or “hovering” over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2), apparently sustaining and manifesting God’s immediate presence in his creation (cf. Ps. 33:6, where “breath” should perhaps be translated “Spirit”; see also Ps. 139:7).

In the work of redemption there are also distinct functions. God the Father planned redemption and sent his Son into the world (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:9–10). The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us (John 6:38; Heb. 10:5–7; et al.). God the Father did not come and die for our sins, nor did God the Holy Spirit. That was the particular work of the Son. Then, after Jesus ascended back into heaven, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to apply redemption to us. Jesus speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26), but also says that he himself will send the Holy Spirit, for he says, “If I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7), and he speaks of a time “when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth” (John 15:26). It is especially the role of the Holy Spirit to give us regeneration or new spiritual life (John 3:5–8), to sanctify us (Rom. 8:13; 15:16; 1 Peter 1:2), and to empower us for service (Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:7–11). In general, the work of the Holy Spirit seems to be to bring to completion the work that has been planned by God the Father and begun by God the Son. (See chapter 30, on the work of the Holy Spirit.)

So we may say that the role of the Father in creation and redemption has been to plan and direct and send the Son and Holy Spirit. This is not surprising, for it shows that the Father and the Son relate to one another as a father and son relate to one another in a human family: the father directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directions of the father. The Holy Spirit is obedient to the directives of both the Father and the Son.

Thus, while the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation. The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles.

