

# Systematic Theology – “Thinking God’s Thoughts After Him”

## Class 5 – God as Trinity

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### I. Hello...and Catechism Quiz (Question 9–10)

### II. The Trinity Develops Throughout the Bible

#### A. Our God is One God

1. Deut 6:4
2. Isa 44:6
3. 1 Tim 2:5

#### B. Our One God is Plural in Nature

1. *Elohim* in Genesis 1:1
2. “The Spirit of God” hovering on the waters (Gen 1:2)
3. “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26)

#### C. Our One God is Three Distinct Persons

1. The Baptism of Jesus – Matt 3:13–17
2. The Great Commission – Matt 28:18–20
3. The Consistency of the Language Attached to the Three Persons
  - a) Father (Matt 6:16; 6:9; 11:25–27)
  - b) Son (Ps 2:7; Matt 3:17; John 20:17)
  - c) Spirit (Gen 1:2; Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18-19; Acts 5:3–4)

#### D. The Three Persons Have a Distinct Relationship to One Another

1. At Creation: Gen 1:1–3; John 1:1–3
2. In Redemption: Eph 1:3–14
3. John’s Gospel
  - a) John 1:1–3
  - b) John 1:18 where Jesus is the “only begotten” of the Father

- c) John 14:10–11, 18: Mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit, but also the Godhead “dwelling” in us
- d) John 16:14; 17:1, 4: The Son glorifies the Father, the Father glorifies the Son, the Spirit glorifies the Son
- e) John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31: The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father
- f) John 5:36; 20:21: Son is sent by the Father; John 15:26; 16:7: Spirit sent by the Father and the Son. Note 15:26 that Spirit is the one who “proceeds” from the Father. Present tense.

**III. Class Challenge: Groups of 3, come up with an analogy of “one-in-three” and “three-in-one.”**

**IV. The Trinity Develops Throughout Church History**

- A. The Apostles Creed – Likely dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the earliest record of it in a letter from Ambrose of Milan to Rome in AD 389.<sup>9</sup> Note the simple statements about “God the Father Almighty,” “Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord,” “the Holy Spirit.”**

I believe in *God the Father Almighty*; Maker of heaven and earth. And in *Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord*; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in *the Holy Spirit*; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.  
Amen.

- B. The Nicene Creed (AD 325) – Note the significant development of the “Lord Jesus Christ” paragraph in response to the Arian controversy.<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> For the Nicene Creed and Creed of the Council of Constantinople, see Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds1/creeds1.iv.iii.html>.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, ***the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;***

By whom all things were made both in heaven by whom all things were made;  
and on earth;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

***And in the Holy Ghost.***

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

**C. The Council of Constantinople (AD 381) – *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*, often referred to as simply “The Nicene Creed” – With this change, the “Lord Jesus Christ” paragraph is developed further**

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, ***the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;*** by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in ***the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father,*** who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

**D. Augustine (354–430) – He especially helped the church see that with any one member of the Trinity you have the whole God because each**

**is fully God. He also shifted the emphasis from the Father being the source of the deity of the Son and Spirit (emphasized in the East) to the whole Trinity being the source of the deity of each person of the Trinity. The full deity of the Son was therefore protected.**

#### **E. The Athanasian Creed (AD 500s)**

Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith:

Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And the Catholic Faith is this: 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: and another of the Holy Spirit.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal.

Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit.

The Father uncreated: the Son uncreated: and the Holy Spirit uncreated.

The Father incomprehensible: the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.

The Father eternal: the Son eternal: and the Holy Spirit eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.

And also there are not three uncreated: nor three incomprehensibles, but one uncreated: and one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is Almighty: the Son Almighty: and the Holy Spirit Almighty.

And yet they are not three Almightyies: but one Almighty.

So the Father is God: the Son is God: and the Holy Spirit is God.

And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.

So likewise the Father is Lord: the Son Lord: and the Holy Spirit 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 be 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 afore, or after another: none is greater, or less than another.***

***But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal.***

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.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation: that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man.

God, of the Substance of the Father; begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the Substance of His Mother, born into the world.

Perfect God: and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead: and inferior to the Father as touching His Manhood.

Who although He be God and Man; yet He is not two, but one Christ.

One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God.

One altogether; not by confusion of Substance: but by unity of Person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell: rose again the third day from the dead.

He ascended into heaven, He sitteth on the right hand of the Father God Almighty.

From whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;

And shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.

This is the Catholic Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he can not be saved.

**F. The Council of Toledo (AD 589) – adds the *filioque* clause (“and the Son”) – the final development of the original Nicene Creed**

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in ***one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father***, by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in ***the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son***; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And one holy catholic and apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## V. The Trinity: 6 Summary Statements

### A. There is in the Divine Being but one indivisible essence (ousia, essentia).<sup>11</sup>

1. Not just one kind of being in God, God is one being.  
*Not like having the same kind of vanilla ice cream in all the Breyer's containers at Food Lion, but three containers of ice cream but inside is the exact same ice cream—to take a bite out of one container is to take a bite out of all three containers?!?!?!?*  
  
 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (Deut 6:4)
2. Key terms used to describe the one “essence” of the Godhead:
  - a) “Essence,” “what something is” fr. Latin *essentia*.<sup>12</sup> Connects to the Latin *esse* (“to be, exist”). Accents more the ongoing existence of God, God as fullness of “being.”
  - b) “Substance,” “the ‘stuff’ of which someone or something consists.”<sup>13</sup> Connects to *substantia* (“nature, substance”). Accents more what he is, what is it that God is that nothing else is.
  - c) “Ousia,” “Being (that which is),”<sup>14</sup> from the Greek, related to the feminine participle of the verb “to be” (*eimi*). In ancient Greek (Plato) it spoke to “the being, essence, nature” of a thing.<sup>15</sup> This word was captured in the Nicene Creed through its use of *homoousios*, “same essence,” to speak of the Son of God. He is not of a “similar essence” (*homoiousios*), which the East preferred, but has the “same essence” (*homōousios*) as the Father.
3. This is deeply mysterious. Each is not 1/3 of God, and there are not 3 gods. Each is fully the one being of God. The “pervasive

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<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, *ST*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 2004), 499.

<sup>13</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 502.

<sup>14</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 501.

<sup>15</sup> Liddell & Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (1889).

monotheism” of the Bible is why we say this: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1); “There is one God” (1 Tim 2:5). Each person of the Trinity is fully, eternally, God, occupying the same ‘space’ since each is omnipresent, possessing the same knowledge since each is omniscient, possessing the same power since each is omnipotent, possessing the same glory, the same infinitude, the same status. Our God is one Being and not three beings, one ‘Thing’ and not three things.

**B. In this one Divine Being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>**

From passages like the ones above, we know this to be true. The persons are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth....No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:14, 18)

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2)

It’s important to say here that we did not name God. We didn’t give him the name “Father” or “Son” or “Holy Spirit.” These are names he revealed about himself.

The Father *has always been* the Father. The Son *has always been* the Son. The Holy Spirit *has always been* the Holy Spirit. These were true before Creation, before the Son came as a man and as the Son of Man (or Son of Mary). They are eternally and permanently true.

These names for the persons of God have meaning: God the Father is the consummate Father—to the Son and the Spirit and to all creation in a unique and unchanging manner.

The Son is the Son of the Father, eternally so. The Word which creates, saves, judges, a “word” being that which comes from the being of another.

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<sup>16</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 501.

There was no moment when this happened since the Son is eternal. He has always related to God the Father in this way.

The Holy Spirit—“Spirit” is the same word as breath, wind—is the “breath” of the Father and the Son. The life, breath, and power of God that springs eternally from the Father and the Son.

Each lives for the glory and joy of the others. The Father seeks to glorify the Son. The Son seeks to glorify the Father. The Spirit seeks to glorify the Father and the Son.

1. “Person” (fr. Latin *persona*). Different than how we speak of “people.” Has to do with an individual, rational being. Multiple persons at a human level must always be separate from one another. Not so in the Godhead, which is indivisible.
2. *Hypostasis*, a Greek word that came to mean “something with a concrete existence.”<sup>17</sup> Its meaning varied in the early centuries of the church.
3. *Subsistence* (fr. Latin *subsistentia*, “that which exists in itself and not in another”<sup>18</sup>).

Berkhof notes that “the variety of terms used points to the fact that their inadequacy was always felt.”<sup>19</sup>

“Person,” therefore, I call a “subsistence” in God’s essence.  
John Calvin<sup>20</sup>

As one God, the three Persons are distinguished not by essential properties (characteristics related to essence) but by their personal properties (sometimes called ‘incommunicable properties’).  
Kevin DeYoung<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 499.

<sup>18</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 231.

<sup>19</sup> Berkhof, *ST*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes*, I:xiii:6.

<sup>21</sup> DeYoung, “Distinguishing Among the Three Persons of the Trinity within the Reformed Tradition” (Sep 27, 2016), available at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/distinguishing-among-the-three-persons-of-the-trinity-within-the-reformed-tradition/>.



**C. “The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons.”<sup>22</sup>**

Anywhere you point to “God,” you point to the Father and also to the Son and also the Spirit. And each is fully and infinitely and eternally God. No one of them is more God than the other two.

**D. “The subsistence (personhood) and operation of the three persons in the divine Being is marked by a certain definite order.”<sup>23</sup>**

In terms of the persons (subsistences) of God the Father is first, the Son second, the Spirit third. But they are co-equal in glory and attributes and God-ness.

**E. “There are certain personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished.”<sup>24</sup>**

Berkhof summarizes the teaching of the church about the persons of the Godhead:

“Generation is an act of the Father only; filiation belongs to the Son exclusively; and procession can only be ascribed to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>25</sup>

“Though they are all works of the three persons jointly, creation is ascribed primarily to the Father, redemption to the Son, and sanctification to the Spirit. This order in the divine operations points back to the essential order in God and forms the basis for what is generally known as the economic Trinity.”<sup>26</sup>

The “economic Trinity” has to do with the way each person in the Trinity is highlighted by different aspects of the work of Creation and Redemption.

Creation and Redemption are generally seen as...

*From the Father...*  
*Through the Son...*  
*By the Spirit.*

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<sup>22</sup> Berkhof, *ST*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Berkhof, *ST*, 88.

<sup>24</sup> Berkhof, *ST*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Berkhof, *ST.*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Berkhof, *ST.*, 89.

An example:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:11–14)

And our experience is generally...

*In/by the Spirit...  
Through the Son...  
To the Father.*

An example of what I mean:

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)

**F. “The Church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery beyond the comprehension of man.”<sup>27</sup>**

To explain what he means by “mystery,” he adds:

Man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible....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.

Louis Berkhof<sup>28</sup>

## **VI. And so, we worship and trust him!**

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)

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<sup>27</sup> Berkhof, *ST.*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Berkhof, *ST.*, 89.