

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—  
Lesson 5—God’s Singularity and Trinity, Q. 5-6

Having learned that *God is a personal Spirit* (Jn 4.24), the doctrine of the *personality* of God is taught in the Bible under two main heads: **1)** there is but one God (Q.5), **2)** this one God exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hence, the *singularity* and the *triunity* of God (Q.6). In the OT we read of the *unity* and in the NT we’re enlightened in the knowledge of the *trinity*.

I. The singularity of God

- A. To say that there is “but one only,” is not to speak in contrast to the Son and Spirit, but rather in contrast to *all* that are not God and to *all* that are falsely called so, Dt 6.4; Jer 10.10; Jn 10.30
  - 1. “One” is not used in Scripture in a mathematical sense, but in the sense of differentiation and distinction. It points to God’s absolute aloneness and uniqueness. There is *none* like Him, Isa 40.18, 25; 46.5. He alone is God, Dt 4.35; 1Kgs 8.60; Isa 45.5-6
  - 2. He stands apart by Himself as a transcendent being and does not come under our finite logic. We don’t count Him as one; rather, we praise Him as the only one, the living and true God, 1Cor 8.4-6. He is of a single, indivisible transcendent essence, and can neither be counted by men nor considered in his trinity as an accumulation of any sort.
  - 3. “Not *number*, but *glory*, is expressed in the utterance: “the LORD our God, the LORD is *one*.”
- B. As “living and true,” Jer 10.10, God has life in Himself and is alone the fountain of life to all His creatures, Acts 17.28. All other gods so named are false and dead, Ps 115.2-9
- C. Reflections:
  - 1. The unity of the world shows that there’s only one Maker. The necessary attributes of a divine being (Q.3) *require* that there be only one. The voice of conscience testifies that there’s only one Lord, Master, and Lawgiver. And reason as well teaches that there can be but one infinite and absolute Sovereign. The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*, Dt 6.4

II. The triunity of God

- A. The doctrine of the trinity is perhaps the most mysterious and difficult doctrine presented to us in Scripture. Second to it is the mystery of the hypostatic union of the two natures of God and man in one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The tri-personality of God is exclusively a truth of special revelation—one which lies outside the realm of natural reason. “As well might we expect to confine the ocean within a tea-cup as to place a full explanation of the nature of God within the limits of our feeble human minds.” (Boettner). Consequently, we only know what we learn from Scripture and we must humble ourselves to accept the truth as presented. “Our attitude should be that of disciples who, with true humility and reverence, are ready to receive implicitly whatever God has seen fit to reveal.”
- B. We should also notice that the doctrine of the trinity is the distinctive mark of the Christian religion, setting it apart from all the other religions of the world. Working without the benefit of the revelation of Scripture, and working only from the fallen conceptions of what it means to be made in God’s image, analogically reasoning from ourselves up to God, men have arrived at some limited truths concerning the nature and Person of God. But no natural religion has ever arrived at a trinitarian conception of God. For apart from supernatural revelation, there’s *nothing* in human consciousness or experience which can give man the slightest clue to lead him to the distinctive God of the Christian faith: the triune, incarnate, redeeming, sanctifying God.
- C. How did God reveal, and how did man come to know of, His triunity, His tri-personality? It’s helpful to remind ourselves that man’s knowledge of God has been progressive, carried out over 3 stages.
  - 1. **The First Stage.** By natural revelation man learns what God is, and what, by virtue of His essential attributes, He *must* do, Rom 1.18-32. A special communication from God is necessary to tell us what, in His infinite love, He *will* do for the recovery of sinners to raise them to the wonder of communion with Him, Jn 3.16

- a) Hence man knows God *intuitively*. He knows himself to be dependent and responsible and *therefore* knows the One upon whom he is dependent and to whom he is responsible. And he attributes to this One, in an eminent degree, all the *good* he finds in himself, and thus comes to know God as a personal Spirit, infinite, eternal, and perfect in all His attributes.
  - b) Warfield, “The conviction of the existence of God bears the marks of an intuitive truth in so far as it is the universal and unavoidable belief of men, and is given in the very same act with the idea of self.” Cf. Calvin I.1.
  - c) Warfield, “This im-mediate and intuitive perception of God is confirmed and the contents of the idea developed by a series of arguments known as the theistic proofs. As rational creatures made in the image of God, inexcusably able to know Him as God and ourselves before Him as accountable creatures—from natural revelation, *we’re under the necessity of believing in the real existence*: 1) of the infinitely perfect Being, 2) of a sufficient Cause for the contingent universe, 3) of an intelligent Author of the order and the manifold workings observable in nature, and 4) of a Lawgiver and Judge for dependent moral beings, endowed with the sense of duty and an ineradicable feeling of responsibility, conscious of the moral contradictions of the world and craving a solution for them, and living under an intuitive perception of right which we do not see realized in this life.”
2. **The Second Stage** in the revelation of God was that given through the OT period. A great advance is made upon the revelation given in nature as God is revealed as the God of grace and the Redeemer of sinners. Great stress is made upon the grace or undeserved love of God as exhibited in His dealings with His sinful and wrath-deserving creatures, Gen 3.15-24
- a) However, this love of God is not revealed at the expense of the other moral attributes of God. Instead, it’s revealed upon a background of the strongest assertion and fullest manifestation of its companion attributes, especially the divine righteousness and holiness.
  - b) Thus God is not represented in the OT as forgiving sin because He cares so little about it; nor yet because He’s so exclusively the God of love that all other attributes shrink into benevolence. Rather, He’s presented as moved to deliver man from his sinful guilt and pollution because He pities fallen man, in bondage to sin and misery and under His imminent wrath, and is pleased to deliver man in a manner which brings as complete satisfaction to His infinite justice and holiness as to His unbounded love. Thus the revelation of God’s grace is the revelation of all the attributes of God working in complete harmony with each other in such a way that God remains just and holy while justifying the ungodly, forgiving and merciful to sinners while justly and righteously judging their sins.
  - c) And thus, in the OT period, God is revealed as the God of holiness, redemption, grace and love, justice and judgment, the God who cannot look upon evil (Hab 1.13) and yet who makes a way to deliver His people from it (Ps 27.9).
  - d) \*How can God do all this? How can God be all this to His people? How can all this be consistently worked out by the one, true, and living God?
3. **The Third Stage** is that given in the NT, in which God is represented as existing as a trinity of Persons, each of whom performs a distinctive part in the works of creation, providence, and redemption. Which is to say, the revelation of the trinity is intrinsically bound up with the full revelation and execution of the redemption of sinners.
- a) Warfield: “The elements of the plan of salvation are rooted in the mysterious nature of the Godhead, in which there coexists a threefold distinction of persons with absolute unity of essence. So that the revelation of the Trinity was accordingly *incidental* to the execution of this plan of salvation, in which the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation of sin, and the Son, when He returned to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, sent the Spirit to apply His redemption to men. The disclosure of this fundamental fact of the divine nature, therefore, *lagged until the time had arrived for the actual working out of the long-promised redemption*; and it was accomplished, first of all in fact rather than in word, by

- the actual appearance of God the Son on earth (Jn 1.14) and the subsequent manifestations of the Spirit, who was sent forth to act as His representative in His absence (Acts 2.33).”
- b) Augustine: “Go to the Jordan and thou wilt see the Trinity.”
4. The essential elements which enter into and together make up this great revelation of the Triune God are:
- a) That there is but one God, Dt 6.4; Isa 64.6; 1Cor 8.4; Js 2.19
- (1) That the Father is God (Mt 11.25; Jn 6.27; 8.41; Rom 15.6; 1Cor 8.6; Gal 1.1-4; Eph 4.6; 6.23; 1Th 1.1; Js 1.27; 3.9; 1Pet 1.2; Jude 1).
- (2) the Son is God (Jn 1.1, 18; 20.28; Acts 20.28; Rom 9.5; Heb 1.8; Col 2.9; Phil 2.6; 2Pet 1.1).
- (a) He existed before His birth to Mary, Jn 8.58; 17.5; 3.31
- (b) All the **names** and titles of God are given to Him, Jn 1.1; 1Jn 5.20; Rom 9.5; Rev 1.8
- (c) All the divine **attributes** are predicated of Him: *eternity*, Jn 8.58; *immutability*, Heb 1.10-11; 13.8; *omnipresence*, Mt 18.20; 28.20; Jn 3.13; *omniscience*, Mt 11.27; *omnipotence*, Jn 5.17; Heb 1.3
- (d) All divine **works** are asserted of Him: *creation*, Jn 1.3-10; *preservation and providential government*, Col 1.17; *judgment*, Jn 5.22; Mt 25.31-32; *giving eternal life*, Jn 10.28; *sending the Holy Spirit*, Jn 16.7
- (e) Divine **worship** is to be paid to Him, Heb 1.6; Rev 1.5-6
- (3) and the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5.3-4; 1Cor 2.10-11; Eph 2.22).
- (a) Christ uses all the personal pronouns when referring to Him, Jn 14.17, 26; 15.26
- (b) The Spirit acts a Person, teaching, interceding, and giving, Jn 16.7-14; Rom 8.26; 1Cor 12.11
- (c) He is the executor and applier of the work of redemption, Jn 3.5; 1Cor 6.11
- (d) He may be grieved and men can commit blasphemy against Him, Eph 4.30; Mt 12.31-32
- b) That the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are personally distinct from one another, distinguished by personal pronouns, able to send and be sent by one another, to love and honor each the other, Jn 15.26; 16.13-14; 17.8, 18, 23; 16.14; 17.1
- c) They are eternally and mutually related as Father, Son, and Spirit. They are not subordinate in being the one to the other, but it may be said that in order of existence the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, an order reflected also in the works of both creation, providence, and redemption. For in the work of redemption, the Scriptures attribute the sovereign plan to the Father, the execution of it to the Son, and the application of it to the Spirit, Eph 2.18
- d) The three persons of the Godhead are related to one another and exist together as one essence, being the same in substance, and equal in power and glory (*cf. WLC 11*). So there are neither three gods nor three substances or parts to the one God. The whole of the Godhead, together with all the divine attributes, belong equally to each of the Persons, and yet, the Father is not the Son is not the Spirit. They are distinguishable and yet indivisible. –And so He stands apart by Himself as a transcendent being and does not come under our logic. The divine nature does not come under number.
5. The doctrine of the trinity is but the synthesis of these facts, and adding nothing to them, simply recognizes in the unity of the Godhead such a Trinity of persons as is involved in the working out of the plan of redemption. The three persons are uniformly represented in Scripture in their essential nature each alike God over all, blessed forever, Rom 9.5. “I cannot think of the Unity without being irradiated by the Trinity; I cannot distinguish between the Trinity without being carried up to the Unity.” (Gregory of Nazianzen).
6. Hodge: “Truth is order to holiness. God does not make known His being and attributes to teach men science, but to bring them to the saving knowledge of Himself. This is especially true of the doctrine of the Trinity.”

## Questions

1. When we confess that God is one, what are we saying about God? Are we counting Him like we would count a person?
2. Can we discover the doctrine of the trinity from nature? What does God reveal about Himself from nature?
3. Why doesn't God, in the OT, just just come out and say, “I am three,” or “I am Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” cf. Isa 45.5-6
4. What do we say to the criticism of the trinity that “it's impossible for 1 to at the same time be 3”?
5. Are there three separate individuals in God?
6. What is the strongest proof for the trinity? Give verses to show this.
7. Why does God reveal Himself in trinity at all?
8. What are the special characteristics and works of each Person?
9. Memorize WSC 5-6