

The One God who is Three

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Preacher: Chris Fry

[0 : 00] We're looking at the foundations of the gospel and we've come to the second part last week Philip took us through God the creator today we're looking at the one God who is three encountering the Trinity we're going to be looking at various passages in the Bible please have your Bible ready if you haven't got a Bible please just put your hand up and Maureen will get you one.

We've all got a Bible you can refer to some of the Bible verses will be on the screen others be encouraging you to look up yourself as we go through this.

Start with a verse from 2 Corinthians chapter 13 it's a very well-known verse it's often quoted at the end of meetings may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. This is what we would call a Trinitarian verse.

It speaks of God who is three persons. Line one the Lord Jesus Christ. Line two the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 23] Many other verses like this in the Bible and this is our theme this morning. One God who is three. Dr. Lloyd-Jones said this the doctrine of the Trinity is the differentiating doctrine of the Christian faith.

We will see that as we go through because this is a doctrine that's faced many challenges. I referred earlier to this big council that was held in Nicaea in 325 AD.

It was followed up by a further council in Constantinople, Istanbul now 381 AD. That is 350 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And during that intervening period of 350 years there had been a great deal of debate, anguish debate amongst Christian peoples about exactly how to consider and understand God. and they took great pains to formulate understanding in words, which is the reason why we have what we call the Nicene Creed that we read earlier.

[2 : 35] I'm actually in some awe of these people who saw it to be such an important matter that they thought and discussed and wrote at great length in 325 AD.

I wonder if we are as careful and as diligent and as concerned about the truth as those folk were 1700 years ago.

Jim Packer says the Trinity is the basis of the gospel and the gospel is the declaration of the Trinity in action. Again, we'll touch on that as we come to that later.

It just reminds us again that some understanding of this doctrine rather than avoidance of it is actually fundamental to our understanding of the greatness of God, of the God who planned this salvation of which we are recipients.

And the gospel is certainly a declaration of the triune God in action. The wonderful nature of God, the Father who planned and encouraged his Son to leave the glories of heaven to come to this earth.

[4 : 01] The Son who so willingly did that and the Spirit who is so bountifully poured out as a result of the victory and the elevation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God.

Well, we're going to start today by firstly looking at the Bible teaching on this matter. And it will be clear to a number of you that the Bible does not in any one particular place give a full explanation of the subject of the Trinity.

Indeed, the word is not used in the original language in any way at all. It's a word that has had to be created to express a truth. So firstly, this morning I'm going to be stating the Bible's teaching on this matter as best I can.

Secondly, to consider some of the challenges that have been made over the years to this teaching. And thirdly, to make application. So, let me say from the very beginning that this subject, above all

subjects, is a matter of revelation.

This is not something that can be dreamed up by man. And it certainly wasn't dreamed up by man. [5 : 21] Part of the wonder of the reading of the Bible is to see the way that things are expressed that are actually well beyond the understanding of men.

And this is a matter of revelation. So we stick to the Bible in this. And we're not going to depart and going to any other areas apart from what the Bible has to say.

I start with this well-known call and cry that was given to the nation of Israel. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 says this.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. In that simple statement, there is a declaration that there is only one God.

That, in a way, was an amazing fact and statement to be made at that particular time when the world was populated with nations that believed in many gods. But God declares himself to be the one and only.

[6 : 24] Surely this is what emerges also out of the reading that we had this morning. In the New Testament, Paul echoes that thought. Galatians 3 verse 20.

God is one. And that God is not only a one God, but he is an alone God. There's none other like him. Isaiah 40 verse 25 says, To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. This one God is also revealed as three persons.

So we see in Revelation that the Father is God. Here's a longish verse. In fact, all the verses I'm giving you, I'm going to try to give them in the long version so you can see the context of them.

John 17 verses 1 to 3 says this. After Jesus said this, and he's speaking at the Last Supper now and speaking in the context of his disciples, he looked towards heaven and prayed, Father, the time has come.

[7 : 33] Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people, that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.

Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17 verses 1 to 3, and I've put into bold text there the connection.

He's calling out to his Father in prayer, in adoration, in thanksgiving. And he's linking the Father to the Father being God, that they may know you, the only true God.

The Father is God. Now, turn in your Bibles to John chapter 20 verse 17. Jesus is speaking to Mary after his resurrection.

John 20 verse 17. And Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

[8 : 47] And I just draw attention to the very close relationship in those words, in the grammar. My Father, my God. Your Father, your God.

Secondly, the Son is God. Back on the screen. 1 John chapter 5 verse 20. The Apostle John, writing to Christians, says, We know also that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true.

And we are in him who is true, even in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God, and eternal life.

Please turn in your Bibles to the fulfillment of prophecy, and we could look in many places to understand this particular line of thought.

But I'll link together Isaiah chapter 8 verse 14. It's not actually on the screen there. Isaiah 8 verse 14, and Romans 9 verse 33. So, Isaiah 8 verse 14.

Verse 13, the context is, The Lord Almighty, the Lord Almighty, he will be a sanctuary, but for both houses of Israel, he will be a stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.

[10 : 25] And we turn now to the New Testament in Romans chapter 9 verse 33. And we had one sermon from Phil, which lingered on this particular point.

Romans 9 verse 33. Paul, looking back on Old Testament writing, says, As it is written, See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.

And so, this, as in many other places, we see the linking of the Almighty God, in many cases Yahweh himself, the Lord, with the fulfillment of that in the person of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 45 verses 22 and 23. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity, a word that will not be revoked. Before me every knee will bow, by me every tongue will swear.

[11 : 39] And then in the New Testament, we see that gloriously fulfilled and spoken of in the book of Philippians chapter 2, verses 9 to 11. Where speaking of the great work of Jesus Christ and his willingness to go to the cross, it is said of him, Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So you see the connection. Before me every knee will bow, by me every tongue will swear. Old Testament times, speaking of the Almighty God. New Testament language, the Lord Jesus is referred to as the one before whom every tongue will confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Many other verses and texts we could refer to, there is salvation in him alone. Acts chapter 4. How often in the Old Testament times does God speak of him being the only savior?

That's what we read earlier, wasn't it? Jesus makes his call to people to believe in him. He specifically says, you believe in me, John 14 verse 1.

That prayer is to be made to Jesus Christ. Acts 7, 59. We'll move on to the nature of the spirit.

[13 : 18] The person of the spirit. The spirit is God. 1 Corinthians 12 verses 3 to 5. Again it's on the screen. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the spirit of God, says Paul, says Jesus be cursed.

No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

So the ministry and working of the Holy Spirit of God through the believer is linked to the Holy Spirit being God himself. We're temples of the Holy Spirit.

God dwells in us. In Acts chapter 5 verses 3 and 4, there's the curious, rather awesome story of the way in which the disciples were selling their land to be able to give the proceeds from it for the good of the community.

But this chap Ananias there, he sold the land, but only gave a part of what he'd received for that cause, although he indicated that perhaps he'd given all of it.

[14 : 36] 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? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?

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. So again, in this one paragraph, we see the intimate connection between the lying to the Holy Spirit and lying to God.

We also ought to draw attention to the closeness of identity, the three together, and in these very well-known words at the end of the Gospel of Matthew 28, verses 18 and 19, Jesus came to the disciples and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name, singular, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And here we see both the oneness of God and the threeness of God and the equality of God as well, so that in the persons of the Trinity, the Father is equal to the Son, the Son is equal to the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 54] I've quoted a few verses from the Bible, but more compelling to my mind is the intimate, delicate unfolding of this revelation through the pages of Scripture, so that almost unconsciously, there is a constant Trinitarian understanding which is brought out from the writers in the prophecies, in the histories, in the Psalms.

And as we come into the New Testament, those things were rather vague and faint, become clearer and clearer. And it has often been said about this doctrine that it is not so much that people had to kind of wrestle with this to try to come to some, sort of appreciation, but rather that they couldn't help but see it in the Bible itself.

It was something that they were forced to deal with because there was no other way of interpreting the Word of God. And so, in summary, there is only one God.

This one God exists of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is distinct. Each person is fully God. There is only one God.

These are mighty truths. And in our prayer time before, someone was praying about the issue of understanding and recognizing that there's a limit to what the understanding can reach on this particular point.

[17 : 41] And it's because of that understanding that there have been so many challenges to the Bible's teaching. This teaching has been the subject of strong and prolonged debate and disagreement, mostly because of the magnitude and the mystery of this teaching, which overwhelms human logic and is therefore dismissed as impossible in place of something that seems more acceptable and manageable.

So, I just run briefly through a number of different versions of the being of God as exist in the world historically and in the world today.

And I've done my best to try to do my homework on this. But if any of you have sort of greater knowledge and nuances on these particular points, well, it'd be good to hear from you afterwards. Belief in one God, but God being only one person. Right, this is the position of Islam. It's also the position of Judaism. It's the position of the Unitarians.

There is a Unitarian church in Brighton and the Christadelphians who are a much smaller group. But nevertheless, they've gone into that place and they've gone into that place because they're not accepting the revelation of the Bible.

[18 : 56] There's also the belief in two gods, which we could call dualism, so that there is a God of good and a God of evil. And those two are battling the two things out.

Now, we believe in a God who is certainly good and we believe also in one who is evil, which is Satan. But the Bible does never describe Satan as a mighty God.

That is not a Bible teaching. There is belief in three separate gods, which is the position of the Mormons. So you should be clear on this particular point.

I've been onto some of the websites associated with Mormons and different Mormons come out with different expressions of this. But this is their teaching in itself, that they believe that God is the Father and that Jesus was born of the Father and that the Spirit is some sort of a force that emanates from the Father.

And they ascribe Godness to each of those, but certainly not equality and they are certainly separate. There is also belief in a hierarchy of gods in the Godhead, which is the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

[20 : 08] So we need to be clear about that as well, that they would see Jesus Christ as a created being who is of lesser importance or lesser weight than the Father.

And again, they would see the Spirit as a force and not a person. Oh, there is belief in many gods. So Hinduism has one God who is a supreme being and there are 330 million gods.

I've taken that from their own sight. So that's the way it is. And that's what they believe in, that these are all sort of created beings of some sort, but all ascribed godness to.

And in case you're feeling rather smug out there and saying I don't believe any of that, I just challenge you with this thought that whatever God you worship, indicates that you are a worshipper of many gods.

Because there are many gods out in the world. Whatever it is that you worship, whatever it is that has the priority, whatever it is that you serve, whether it be serving your career, serving the idea of philosophy being the great God, or serving music and the arts and so forth, whatever it is that has priority in your life and takes the place that should belong to God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that's your God.

[21 : 38] And whatever God you worship makes you a believer in one of many gods. And so I believe that to be the situation in this city today.

that many people who would have no allegiance to any of the stuff that's gone before in terms of those different religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, we're all worshippers by nature. We worship something. And the question is whether or not what we worship measures up to what is being revealed to us as the only true and living God. So in the face of so much confusion, I just give this simple message, please stick to the Bible.

Please stick to the Bible and allow the Bible to speak to you.

And let us be those who love reading our Bibles and the whole of our Bibles because as we do so, we will be so greatly enriched and come to, what can I say, a more balanced and full and strengthening understanding of the nature of God, the one who is three.

[22 : 57] So that's something about challenges to the Bible's teaching. And I read on one site this comment.

One more thing I often tell my students, that if they say, I get it, or now I understand, that they are more than likely celebrating the fact that they are a heretic.

When you understand the biblical principles and let the tensions remain without rebuttal, then you are orthodox. When you solve the tension, you have most certainly entered into one of the errors that we seek to avoid.

He goes on to say, confused? Good. That's just where you need to be. I tapped in helpful illustrations of the Trinity.

Wondering what would come out of that. There are many unhelpful illustrations of the Trinity. I won't go into all of those. But here's one that is actually marginally helpful, not to explain, but in order to illustrate what I've just been trying to say.

[24 : 11] So here goes. God in the center of this triangle. The Father is God. The Son is God.

The Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Son. The Son is not the Father. And yet they're all intimately linked with one another in that way.

As any analogy, there are problems. But I think this is somewhat helpful, at least in encapsulating in visual format some of the main features that we've been trying to express of God is one, but there is a threeness there.

And there's an equality. So, you know, don't get too hung up about that and certainly don't pick too many holes in that. There's almost certainly a flaw in that.

I won't tell you what that is. Particularly, but there is bound to be a flaw because this is well beyond our understanding. I want to make now five applications of this particular doctrine because for many Christians it's kind of like a headache.

[25 : 27] It's kind of like almost something that's slightly embarrassing. I'd almost rather, you know, have a Jehovah's Witness position because it's more logical to be able to explain to people. And this is such anathema to Muslims, this idea that God should be three and yet one.

People can get very angry about this particular thought. So, it's understandable if Christians steer clear of this as a subject matter. But I want to give you some very, what I hope, sort of practical and good reasons why it's not just something that lives on our declaration of faith and it's not just something that we occasionally think about but which should sort of flood and invigorate and strengthen our Christian lives.

Well, the first point is this. This doctrine brings glory to God and every departure from it deprives him of glory. I think it's a wonderful thing for us to be brought to this point, all of us here today, and to be brought face to face with something which is beyond our understanding because isn't that what God is?

We might know God but he still remains beyond our understanding. It has always been the dangerous position of people in this world that we make an idol, we craft an idol that we can handle, that we can manage, that we can put on a shelf, that the idol does what we want it to do.

We know where it is and we are in control of the situation. But when we come to this particular doctrine of the Trinity, we're brought into a situation where we are not in control.

[27 : 14] Where the greatness of God exceeds the measure of our thought. And I challenge you to go down this route a little bit because you can begin to think about this subject matter and look at some of the verses that I've already brought to you and you get to a, you think, oh this is good, I'm getting there, I'm getting there, I'm getting there and then suddenly you will find an overwhelming avalanche that the truth sort of overwhelms the position that you've reached.

Please be utterly assured that people have laboured long and hard to, as it were, to achieve the best possible reconciliation between these two ideas of God being one and yet three.

And yet, all they can do is to set these great truths side by side as we have to do in so much of the Bible. and as I spoke earlier about having to have the tension of those two positions fully expressed.

This doctrine brings glory to God. Every departure from it deprives him of his glory. So let us be very, very careful that we are careful to give him glory in this matter and that we glorify God by

ascribing to the Father Godhead, ascribing to Jesus Christ, Godhead, ascribing to the Holy Spirit, Godhead.

He's not just a force. He's not just a junior partner in the Trinity. It's most important that we should do that and be careful in our language and enjoy it in our prayers as well.

[28 : 54] The Bible gives us much encouragement to be thinking and praying in that kind of way. God is relational. This is my second application. God is relational.

So relational that the three are called and are one. We've been thinking about the issue of marriage on Sunday evenings and we'd be reminded of the verse that says and those two shall become one. Those two shall become one. This is a mystery, isn't it? That a man and a woman should come together in a marriage relationship and those two should become one. But that's only a kind of tiny, a puny picture of something which is extraordinarily expressed in the three who are together and become one.

There is such a oneness of purpose, of understanding, of character and ability within the Godhead that they are in a sense indivisible.

And so John says repeatedly in his own letter, God is love. God is love. That's the first point about God. God is love.

[30 : 14] Not just that he shows love, but God is love. And how can that be true unless this one God is also three persons?

So there is this richness of love and community and relationship within the Godhead. So I think we might learn from this that Christianity is primarily relational rather than ethical or moral.

Let me just say that again because I think it's a very important point. Christianity is primarily relational rather than ethical and moral.

So I struggle with the idea that people could be nomadic and could be hermit-like in their relationship to God because God himself demonstrates to us that the core of his being and his likeness is relational.

I think of the verse where he says be holy as I am holy and we are being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and to be in that journey and going on that pathway indicates that we are going in more and more into an understanding of what it is to relate just as Jesus relates to the Father and the Spirit.

[31 : 42] The Spirit relates to the Son and the Father and the Father relates to the Son and the Spirit. So we are to be relational to God who is one in three but relational to one another and relational in our world.

And so we see that the church is actually a Trinitarian concept. The church of Jesus Christ is Trinitarian in concept because it's relational and it's about being together.

And so that I think is a great challenge for us to do that. Note and honour the distinctive roles of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and we note and honour these as we open our Bibles and we see the way in which the relationship between God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit is worked out in the measure of especially the Gospel, the salvation.

And from the Bible we understand that before eternity God chose a certain people to be his own. That he gave those people, the Father gave those people to his Son.

That the Son was willing to actually pay the price of his own death upon the cross in order to save them. And the Holy Spirit agreed within that Trinity that there should be, that he should be the one who should make them alive and grant faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.

[33 : 23] And we see that wonderful coming together of this triune God as the Gospel narrative unfolds. One of those times in the Gospels where the presence of the Father is especially known at the baptism of Jesus where the voice came from heaven and the Spirit descended on him as a dove.

Or the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus is revealed in something of his Godness. And at that point the Father's voice is heard.

This is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased. Listen to him. Note and honour the distinctive roles of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Worship rejoicing and adore our great and gracious Trinitarian God. We have some great hymns, ones we've sung this morning and all of these give us cause for great gladness that we have such a wonderful God.

It is not denied that this conception is above us an incomprehensible bias. It is a mystery. But then God himself is a mystery. We must never forget that God never revealed himself to us in order that we might understand him.

[34 : 44] Nowhere are we told that God requires us to comprehend his nature. God's purpose in revealing himself was that we might know him and above all worship him.

To know him one does not need fully to understand but simply to believe what he says of himself. If what he says is mysterious we must be content to believe a mystery.

And as for worship, the elements of mystery far from being a hindrance is actually a help. We worship what we deem to be above us. A God who is three in one is far above us and beyond our comprehension.

What do we do then? We act as do the beings in heaven who are in his more immediate presence. That is we fall down and worship him that lives forever and ever.

We say holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty thou art worthy O Lord to receive glory and honour and power for thou hast created all things and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

[35 : 50] Any view of God which rejects or even overlooks his three personal greatness is a poverty stricken view. It takes the mystery out of his being and reduces him to near human terms.

We should regard any view which does this as suspect and doomed to extinction. This reduction of God to man size has been attempted many times in history but has always failed in the end.

Arianism, Deism, Unitarianism are dead or dying today. We're faced these days with Jehovah Witnessism. It's lively and strong at present but it can't last. The idol gods are like their makers and always fall.

Much teaching about God within the professing church is also poverty stricken. Rarely is there presented to God's people a God who draws them out in awe and wonder and causes them to fall on their faces.

It's not only the sex but the church itself that is in danger of following a God of its own making. Let us be sure that our God is the God of the apostles and prophets, one perfect and whole being expressed in three distinct persons, each fully God.