

# 301: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY I

## Week 2 - Clues for God + Theology Proper + Trinity TEACHER NOTES

Last week we talked about what theology is and what the Bible is about - it's reliable and authoritative. So we built a foundation and now we can start building some things on top of it.

And for the rest of the class we'll be going in a sequence, layer by layer, to form a robust, cohesive systematic theology.

I said last week how everyone has a theology whether they know it or not - and all of us Christian or not is living their lives under a larger story.

Today we're going to look at the Bible and begin putting together some more fundamental building blocks. So let's start at the beginning.

### **Genesis 1:1**

In the beginning God.

Ok stop right there. We're four words in and we've already come across a big category: God.

And while it's been normal for human beings for the last few thousand years to have a concept of God or some higher power, within the last 60 some odd years - particular in the secular West - the whole concept of God is put on debate. We have the rise of apologetics in the Christian world in large part defending the core ideas of what the Bible presupposes.

So what we're going to do today is first play a little defense, showing the basic reasoning for why believing God is rational - and then we're going to see what makes the God of the Bible so incredibly unique and unlike anyone else.

### **Why it's relevant**

If you're into the current conversations when it comes to religion, you probably have heard of the camp known as the "New Atheism." The New Atheism is a very vocal group of scholars and intellectuals who are very antagonistic towards religion and the irony is, while it's called "The New Atheism," there really isn't anything new about their arguments, they're all just retreads of centuries-old arguments put in modern language.

Within the ranks of The New Atheism movement is a group of four thinkers called The Four Horsemen. This group is made up of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.

They've all published books, been on TV shows and their rhetoric is extremely condescending towards those who are religious.

**Richard Dawkins**

We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.

This sums up a lot of their beliefs - condescending, argumentative and it would probably help if they read a good book defending the Christian faith, but then they wouldn't be able to sell as many books.

(In my experience, this vocal group of atheists is a minority but popular culture wants to say that this is major culture war, atheists versus religious. Most people I know who are atheists are very friendly and not looking to pick fights. )

And while most people probably wouldn't subscribe to Dawkins theology so passionately, I would argue many people including Christians live as functional atheists. Functional atheism would say intellectually that God exists but He's absent from my life, there's no life-change or heart change whatsoever.

Or to put it another way, one sociologist called it "moralistic therapeutic deism." God exists but He's not concerned with your everyday life, just be a good person and do what feels right. God is meant to serve you and make you happy and if something goes wrong in your life it's probably because you're not being good enough or religious enough so try harder. Do better.

All of this to say - whether it's dogmatic atheism, functional atheism, or moralistic therapeutic deism - none of these accurately address the God of Scripture. Each of these forms of atheism, are not actually informed by the God of the Bible but rather what the culture believes God to be.

Which, quick rabbit trail, seems crazy. To those people I want to say, tell me the God you believe. Chances are I probably don't believe in that "god" either.

- "I don't believe in some man in the sky with a big white beard looking down at people." Yea same
- "I don't believe in someone who takes delight in sending people to Hell or giving people cancer." Yeah man, me neither. That's not the God of the Bible.

So like I said, this morning I want to give you two-components for a theological framework for the God of the Bible.

- Part 1, is looking at some classic clues for the existence of God both from the Bible and from academics over the last couple thousand years
- Part 2, we'll lean specifically into what makes the God of the Bible so uniquely beautiful.

This is also known as theology proper. The study of God's nature and character.

## Part 1 - Clues for God<sup>1</sup>

### A. Cosmological

The first clue is known as the Cosmological Argument. It sounds cool, right? As the name implies, Cosmos means world or space, this argument has to do with the creation of the universe.

The argument goes like this:

- 1) Everything comes from something. Cause precedes effect. (Newton's Law says that an object at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force.)
- 2) The universe exists.
- 3) Some outside force must have caused the universe to exist.<sup>2</sup>

To use an analogy. Here's this pen. This pen is going to stay at rest until I move it. So I, as the outside force, have control over it whereas prior to me acting on it had no power within itself to move.

Simple, right? Same with the creation of the universe, and scientists back this up, before there was nothing and then there was something. In order for that to happen, so force had to bring the universe into existence. And that force is God.

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<sup>1</sup> Now out of the gate, I say "clues" for God not "evidence" or "proof." This language is borrowed from Tim Keller and I find this to be helpful because it helps us step back and assess what we're talking about before we dive right in.

First - God, by every definition Christian or not, is transcendent. So God lives in a realm that is different than ours. Similar ways to get at the same idea - God is supernatural, we are natural. God is spirit, we are material.

So talking about "proof" or "evidence" of God I don't find helpful because we often use it to speak on purely material, natural terms - like using the scientific method in a controlled environment to be measured and weighed out. But categorically, God is above all of that. Clues, rather, point to something beyond what is material and natural, what can't be measured and weighed out.

Second - And we don't have a ton of time to get into this, there are assumptions that all people make about the world at large - like morality, the meaning of life, the existence of a soul, even your own existence - that can't actually be verified or proven with 100% certainty. For example, how do you know you right now are sitting in this room. You might say well because I am - I see that I am, I'm hearing your voice, I can feel the seat I'm sitting down in. "Ok but can you really trust your senses? How do you know you're not strapped into a high tech virtual reality machine." You might say that's ridiculous, I know I didn't. I remember waking up this morning and driving here. "Ok but how do you know those memories just weren't implanted into your brain? How do you know you're not just an AI and you're just living out a simulation?" Now I'm being a little tongue-in-cheek but modern philosophers who aren't Christian, have argued for this. And they demonstrated that you can't actually with any certainty prove that you're not actually in a simulation.#

Or to put it simply - most all human beings throughout time have relied on their senses to collect information - but who ever said you can rely on your senses with 100% certainty? Who ever said you can rely on your intellect with 100% certainty? What if your senses and your intellect are faulty? Can you prove with 100% certainty that I should rely on my senses and my intellect 100% of the time?

So when people ask, "Give me a water-tight, slam dunk argument for the existence of God," you can't - and in the very same way I can't give you a water-tight slam dunk argument for you existing right now.

Now don't freak out. I think you do exist. All I'm saying is, let's go with "clues" for God, ok?

<sup>2</sup> Or as apologist Greg Koukl said, "If there's a Big Bang, there needs to be a someone who caused the bang...a Big Bang needs a Big Banger. Some powerful personal intelligence outside of nature and beyond the space-time continuum had to "pull the trigger."

The Bible echoes this too.<sup>3</sup>

### **Genesis 1**

In the beginning God...God said...and it was

Now while this is just one clue. People have countered back (and you can probably see why). They will say this is an ad-infinitum argument, meaning, the argument when taken at face-value doesn't have a stopping point. If the universe was caused by God, then what caused God? Based on the cosmological argument it doesn't make sense to stop at God, you have to keep going and going.

For the Christian our counter-counter argument would be to ask, how are we defining God here? For the Christian, we feel totally comfortable with God as the starting point because according to the Bible God is self-existent. He is the uncaused cause. Or as Thomas Aquinas called, "the first cause." The Bible echoes this in Exodus 3:14.

### **Exodus 3:14**

God said to Moses, "I am who I am."

"I Am who I am." God has no beginning and he has no end. He always has been, always is and always will be.

Now again, this is just one clue. Let's move on to clue two -

### **B. Teleological**

The second argument is known as the teleological argument, or argument by design. And at its basic form it goes like this:

- 1) The universe has meticulous design. Our planet needs such specific tuning in order to sustain life.
- 2) Anything with design and fine-tuning is made by a designer.
- 3) Therefore, the universe has an intelligent designer.

An analogy here. Let's say you find a nice, Rolex watch on the ground. This one costs, \$55,000 (which retails \$100K so it's a bargain.) You would never say, "Wow! I bet this was created from out of nowhere. Look how random chance just created this thing!" Of course not. Your default assumption is that it was created with lots of care and attention to detail by a designer. So it is with God and creation.

The sheer odds of human life operating on our planet implies a particular design. And like the Rolex watch, meticulous design doesn't just happen by accident it must have come from a designer.

Or in the same vein, various disciplines of science echo this with what is known as physical constants. Physical constants are the forces at play within the universe - some couple dozen forces - that keep our

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<sup>3</sup> We should note though, the Bible is not trying to give rational, apologetic reasons to believe in God. The Bible presumes a baseline theology for the original audience. Nevertheless, the Bible will subtly echo these clues for God's existence.

universe in order. The gravitational constant, the speed of light in a vacuum, the electric constant - all of these have such precise design and force behind them.

The Bible, though to be clear not a science book, speaks of something similar:

**Romans 1:20**

For (God's) invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

The biblical author is saying in simpler terms, if you want a big clue for God, just look at the world around you.

**Psalms 19:1-4**

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

**2** Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

**3** There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.

**4** Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun,

In other words, look at the beauty of the world, the cosmos - all of these shout of someone behind all of it.

And of course, there is a counter-argument here as well. The argument is that design doesn't *necessarily* imply a designer. After all, assuming the universe is millions upon millions of years old, then after enough random chance, life is bound to come about. "Life finds a way."

As an example for the counter argument, how many of you are familiar with the casino game Roulette? You have 35 slots on the wheel. You bet red or black and you can double your money. It's a 50-50 chance. OR, you can bet on green. The odds to hit red are 1 to 35. Sure the odds are not in your favor, but after enough spins, you will hit it. Or what about if you bet on the same number twice in a row? The odds are 1 out of 1,200. Again, the odds are waaaaay out there. BUT, after so many attempts, you'll land on it. The counter argument would say that it's the same with the existence of the universe and fine-tuning. After an infinite number of attempts, surely you're bound to get it right.

To that we would say, what are the odds, really of that happening?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> " . . . if the strength of gravity were smaller or larger by an estimated one part in 10<sup>60</sup> of its current value, the universe would have either exploded too quickly for galaxies and stars to form, or collapsed back on itself too quickly for life to evolve." Robin Collins, THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FINE-TUNING OF THE COSMOS, [http://www.apologeticsinthechurch.com/uploads/7/4/5/6/7456646/abridged\\_version\\_of\\_fine-tuning\\_book.doc](http://www.apologeticsinthechurch.com/uploads/7/4/5/6/7456646/abridged_version_of_fine-tuning_book.doc)

**physicist Roger Penrose**

The Creator's pin has to find a tiny box, just 1 part in  $10^{10^{123}}$  of the entire phase space volume, in order to create a universe with as special a Big Bang as that we actually find." (*The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computers, Minds, and the Laws of Physics*, 2005, p 730)

**Stephen Hawking**

If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in one hundred thousand million million, the universe would have recollapsed before it ever reached its present state." (*A Brief History of Time*, 1996, p 156)

Or how about this. Let's go back to our Rolex example. Let's say I take that nice Rolex, place it on the ground, take a big hammer and smash it into a bunch of tiny pieces. Then I scoop up the pieces and place it in a garbage bag and then shake it up. What are the odds that out of an infinite number of shakes that the Rolex will come back together? According to the counter-argument, the watch will eventually find its way. But to that we would say, no it's impossible. And to believe the Rolex will eventually snap back into place requires A LOT of faith.

In fact, the teleological argument was so compelling that a man named Anthony Flew wrote a book about this called "There is a God." Now to most of us, we're thinking, "Okay, so what?" But does anyone know why this is a big deal? Anthony Flew for most of the 20th century was one of the most outspoken atheist thinkers of his day - like the Four Horsemen before there were Four Horsemen. Then towards the end of his life, he became convinced by the teleological argument and converted to belief in a god. Now, while he didn't full out profess Christianity, this is still a radical shift in his thinking which goes to show the power of this argument.

Clue number three -

**C. Moral Argument**

- 1) There is a universal Moral Law.
- 2) If there is a universal Moral Law, there is a Moral Law-giver..

There are moral norms that every culture has. Whether it's care/harm, sanctity/degradation, honor/shame. Every culture universally agrees to what's right and what's wrong - there's some form of morality that all cultures hold to. There's no culture that exists that doesn't have morality. So where did that come from?

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations - 1948.**

Stated there are particular rights that all humans should be entitled to regardless of their race, sex, country of birth, etc.

Where does this come from? How does everyone on the planet have some sort of moral code? The Bible would say it's because you are made in the Image of God and you possess, albeit dimly, some sort of divine moral code within you:

### **Romans 2:14-15**

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Paul is saying in Romans 2 that people who do not have a direct moral code in the same way the Old Testament Jews had - they have a moral code written on their hearts. It's instinctive.

There are two counterarguments to this - societal and biological.

The societal counter argument says we were not born with an innate sense of right and wrong, but we were bred and nurtured to learn between right and wrong. It's not that you know killing someone is bad, it's that you've been taught killing someone is bad.

The biological argument says look at evolution and survival of the fittest. Animals are more likely to survive when they are in packs. And if you want to increase your survival rate, you need some ground rules for your pack if you're gonna make it. In the same way, humans are just further along in the evolutionary chain, we created moral codes so we can better our survival rate. You may have innate rights and wrongs wired into you only because your ancestors knew it would increase your chance to survive.

Now with the societal argument, while it is true that societies create some moral codes based off their cultural context, we still hold to our morality as absolute, not relative. In other words, if I believe that moral codes are relative and left to society to figure out, then why should you still hold to that morality at all? For example, if I intellectually believe lying is a relative morality - then functionally I should have no problem lying all the time. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

#### **CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity***

But the most remarkable thing is this. whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking onto him he will be complaining 'It's not fair' before you can say Jack Robinson. A nation may say treaties do not matter, but then, next minute, they spoil their case by saying that the particular treaty they want to break was an unfair one. But if treaties do not matter, and if there is no such thing as Right and Wrong--in other words, if there is no Law of Nature--what is the difference between a fair treaty and an unfair one? Have they not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really know the Law of Nature just like anyone else?"

The problem with this objection is that it tells you why you *should* be moral but not why you ought to be moral. In other words this line of arguing says, "You should be good to be people because it will work out better for you." But there's no inherent reason to it. It's not actually "good" by definition. Morals lose all good and bad to them, they simply become facts of survival.

Secondly, what if bettering your survival rate (or your herd) caused you to do harm to others? Evolution also is pretty big on survival of the fittest - the strong overthrowing the weak. So then does the end justify the means? To give you a brutal example, this logic was used to commit massive genocide and atrocities within the last 100 years alone. If the reason is ultimately that one tribe wanted to preserve their survival at the expense of another because that's what biology has wired us to do, then we can't say they were morally wrong. We can't say with any certainty they "should" not do that.

And when we say "should" or "should not" when it comes to morality, we're ultimately appealing to a higher authority outside of ourselves.

The fourth clue, and this is more subjective, is the "existential argument."

#### **D. Existential**

God has wired us, both Christians and non-Christians, to experience these moments of transcendence - where we see that life is much more beautiful, grand and beyond our comprehension.

##### **Ecclesiastes 3:11**

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Something happens within you when you see the Grand Canyon. Or hear a piece of music that resonates within you. Or when you hold your baby for the first time. There's a moment of surreal transcendence, where you're swept up into something bigger than yourself that you can't put into words. You can't explain it. And that is, in part, a clue that it's because there is in fact something bigger than you going on in this world. Those are moments of something supernaturally that you're breaking into.<sup>5</sup>

##### **C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity***

If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.

The existential argument goes like this:

- 1) Everyone has moments of transcendence, inner-awareness of something bigger than themselves.
- 2) In a strict material world, there is no explanation for this.
- 3) Therefore those moments of transcendence must come from a transcendent reality outside our natural world.

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<sup>5</sup> Harvard professor James Wood writes to his atheist philosopher friend, "Is That All There Is?" *New Yorker*

How can it be that this world is the result of an accidental big bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose? Can it be that every life - beginning with my own, my husband's, my child's, and spreading outward - is cosmically irrelevant?



The counter argument to this is it's too subjective. There's no hard evidence as to why you felt what you felt. Maybe you just ate something funny. Brain chemicals can explain it all away. Or maybe transcendent experiences helped your ancestors survive?

If that's true, then we wouldn't have transcendent experiences. We would snap out of it, talk ourselves down. We would be quick to say to others, "You know that's just chemicals right?" Once again, while I may intellectually dismiss transcendent experiences, no one functionally believes it.

### **Conclusion to part 1:**

In conclusion, when you take all these arguments individually - cosmological, telogical, moral, existential - they all have their strengths and they have their weaknesses, but when you bring them all together you're left with a feeling of something bigger - there is Something that created this, with strict attention to design, who operated the universe to run a certain way, who operated human life to operate a certain way, and who allows us to experience brief moments of this "bigger reality."

To believe the alternative - that there is nothing out there and everything was brought about by an infinite amount of random accidents, and that human dignity and morality are social constructs, and that any moment of love or transcendence you feel is just brain chemicals and nothing more - YOU NEED TO REALIZE - requires an incredible amount of faith to hold to.

When you look at all the clues, it becomes pretty convincing that there is a higher power out there.

### **Transition**

And if you're familiar with these arguments you should ultimately know where these clues fall short. And it's this: all we did was show there's a higher force out there (deism), not necessarily show that this God is personal or that the God of the Bible is the true God.

So we need something more if we are to understand the God of Scripture. And when we speak of God and the things about Him, theologians tend to break that down into two categories: **general revelation and special revelation.**

**General revelation says: here are the general (vague, abstract) things we can know about God based off our senses and reasoning and experiences.**

So those four classic apologetic arguments for the clues of God? General revelation.

But all that does is tell us there is a god, it doesn't tell us anything specifically about this God. I can look at nature, physics, social theory - and it tells me there's something bigger out there than me. That's it. Anthony Flew who I mentioned earlier, did not become a Christian. He became a deist. A believer in a higher power, which is a big deal for sure considering his background, but he didn't know the God of the Bible personally.

So general revelation is not enough.

Which gets us to the second category: special revelation.

**Special revelation:** here are the things we can know specifically about God based off of what He directly communicates about Himself.

Special revelation tells me there's something bigger out there than me and that God has a name. Why? Because He is telling me.<sup>6</sup>

Is that an arrogant claim to make? No. We're simply repeating what God has said about Himself.

Illustration - Harry Potter book vs autobiography

To think about the distinction between general and revelation, think about trying to know the author JK Rowling. If I only read Harry Potter books, what would that tell me about the author? It would tell me the author is incredibly creative and imaginative. That's about it. I don't actually know anything personally about her other than she exists and she's creative.

But what if she wrote an autobiography? Then I could know something personal about her. Or what if she knocked on my door and introduced herself to me face-to-face. Through those direct encounters I now know with confidence something about this creator that I couldn't have otherwise known.

Similarly, when we talk about special revelation, there are two ways in which God reveals Himself, both working in harmony with one another and not contradicting either.

**1 - The Bible** - God's perfect record of what He's said and done throughout time.

**2 - God directly showing up** - we see this in Scripture and today - but more on that later

When we survey Scripture we actually see that God has a lot to say about Himself. What He says about Himself sets Him apart from anything and everything else not only in creation but among other religions and spiritual entities.

So we get back to Genesis 1:1 - in the beginning God. And who is God exactly?

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<sup>6</sup> "In 1961 the Russians put the first man into space, Yuri Gagarin. Nikita Khrushchev was the Russian premier, and he said that when Gagarin went into space, the cosmonaut discovered that there was no God there. In response C. S. Lewis wrote an article, 'The Seeing Eye.' Lewis said if there is a God who created us, we could not discover him by going up into the air. God would not relate to human beings the way a man on the second floor relates to a man on the first floor. He would relate to us the way Shakespeare relates to Hamlet. Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet's world and of Hamlet himself. Hamlet can know about Shakespeare only if the author reveals information about himself in the play. So too the only way to know about God is if God has revealed himself." *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ* by Timothy Keller

The answer the Bible gives you to that questions is all special revelation.

We see in Scripture how God is powerful, he creates, he sustains, he is gracious, he is loving, he is kind. All of that is special revelation because it's describing His unique character. How He is unlike any other God or spiritual being out there.

Theologians break this down even further, they'll separate God's character into two categories:

Communicable and incommunicable attributes

**Communicable attributes - characteristics of God that He shares with humanity to some degree**

- Loving
- Good
- Wise

**Incommunicable attributes - characteristics of God that He doesn't share with humanity**

- Omnipotent
- Omnipresent
- Omniscient

All of these attributes, His actions, and His revelation to people create this giant tapestry of who God is.

But here's the big attribute that puts light on all the others. What's the one attribute in the Bible that's repeated three times?

**Isaiah 6:3**

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

Holy - categorically different in every way

This redefines all the other ones - the attributes can't be how we define it, it has to be on the basis of how God defines it.

Love - not on our basis, but God's.

Good - not on our basis, but God's.

To where you will eventually come to a point as you study theology, to just not be able to logically comprehend everything about theology. Because His very essence is holy. Now that's not to say He can't be comprehended at all, but that we can't comprehend Him in the fullest.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of my favorite verses on this is Deuteronomy 29:29. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” This means we can have certainty on some things about God because He tells us we can. At the same time, there's things we won't be able to understand either because He doesn't tell us in His Word or because He's holy transcendent and we categorically can't fathom it. This makes studying theology both a confident and humbling pursuit. We can we know things about God that are necessary for faith and practice. And we can know that there are things we won't be able to know in its entirety.

So like we mentioned last week - the Bible as 100% divine, 100% human - hows that make sense? Well, God's holy, He says this is true of Scripture so we take it by faith. We're not saying it's contradictory, we're saying God is God, He's holy, and what He says goes even if we can't fully comprehend it. There are parts even in this lesson and in future lessons where you will think, "Wait how's that work?" And we have to say, "I don't know. But we don't need to know. We accept as authoritative and true because God says so." And that's not arrogant, we're simply repeating what God says is true.

He's holy, holy, holy and we're not.

Even within His very personhood - it's holy. Not only in what He does but in who He is.

Personhood - His personhood is vastly different. What's it mean to be a person? It means you have your own thoughts, your own will, your own emotions.

#### **a. God is one**

From page 1 of the Bible we see God reveals about Himself that He is one

- God is united - perfectly self-sufficient in all ways in power, wisdom. Beyond us in time and space.

Genesis 1 - in the beginning God. Singular. Exodus 3:14 - "I am that I am." Singular, not we are that we are.

The most popular verse in the Old Testament if you were an ancient Jew was Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Known as the "shema." This was their memory verse, a spiritual formation tool to drill this down into their souls:

#### **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

The Lord is how many? One. Singular.

This is monotheism through and through. (Side note: how do you define monotheism? More on that in a couple of weeks.)

And at the same time, in the Old Testament we're taught that God is both transcendent and immanent.

**Transcendent - He is above us**

**Imminent - He is with us**

Is it one or the other? No. Both.

In the OT you see moments of this happening scattered. God showing up in person to people. That's immanence.

Now wait, is He also transcendent when He's showing off His immanence? Yes. How's that possible? Well, God's holy. He can do what He wants.

This dichotomy of God being in both spaces we see elsewhere in the OT<sup>8</sup> -

This is known as a **theophany** - where God physically manifests Himself in the Old Testament

- Genesis 1:2 - the Spirit of God - united and distinct person of God
- Genesis 21 - God manifesting Himself as an angel - united and distinct
- Exodus 3 - the name of God treated with reverence
- Exodus 23 - God manifesting Himself as a warrior - united and distinct
- Psalm 51:11 - God's Spirit - united and distinct and personal
- Daniel 7 - the Son of Man cloud rider coming down from heaven, being worshipped - like God but distinct

Old Testament Jews had categories and narratives for God being both "up there" and "down here" at the same time. In Daniel 7, we saw shadows of God alluding to a person, a Son of Man, who would be worshipped like God. We saw in the Old Testament glimpses of His Spirit dwelling in people for limited amounts of time to empower them to do something.

All of these allude to and set up the stage for the New Testament. When Jesus says He is God - it's not a completely foreign theological concept. Because in the Old Testament we see God showing up in human form.

The New Testament authors also notice all of this happening in the OT too. They're pulling all of these different threads together and linking them to the person of Jesus.

Nerd moment: isn't the Bible so cool?!?

Jesus sees Himself as:

- someone who has the Spirit of God (referenced in Gen 1)
- the ideal human who would destroy the works of Satan (Genesis 3)
- The Son of Man referenced in Daniel 7

And Jesus sees Himself in the same vein as the Old Testament - both as God and a person of God.

The later church would later come in and call this the Trinity.<sup>9</sup>

The word "Trinity" is not found in your Bible but the New Testament authors sync all of these ideas together. That Jesus is God, and a separate distinct person of God. The Spirit is God and a separate distinct person of God. God the Father, likewise, God and separate and distinct person of God.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://thebibleproject.com/podcast/theme-god-e10-gods-name-character/>

<sup>9</sup> Bible skeptics will say this is a classic example of the early church inventing doctrine. In reality, the early church is creating theological terminology to describe large biblical concepts.

The authors are fusing all of these together to give us a holistic picture of the God we worship.

#### **b. God is Three**

##### **Matt 3:16-17 (all three show up at the same time)**

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; **17** and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Wait. Wait. So which one is God? Spirit? Father? Son? Yes.

Again, while more clear in the NT, there was a trail of breadcrumbs of God’s different persons within the OT.

##### **Matt 28:18-20 (notice “in the name” not “names”)**

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in **the name** of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Bad grammar Jesus uses. It should be in the names of but He doesn’t. Why? Because God is one. It’s one name. Why? Because God is one.

##### **John 1:1-3**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

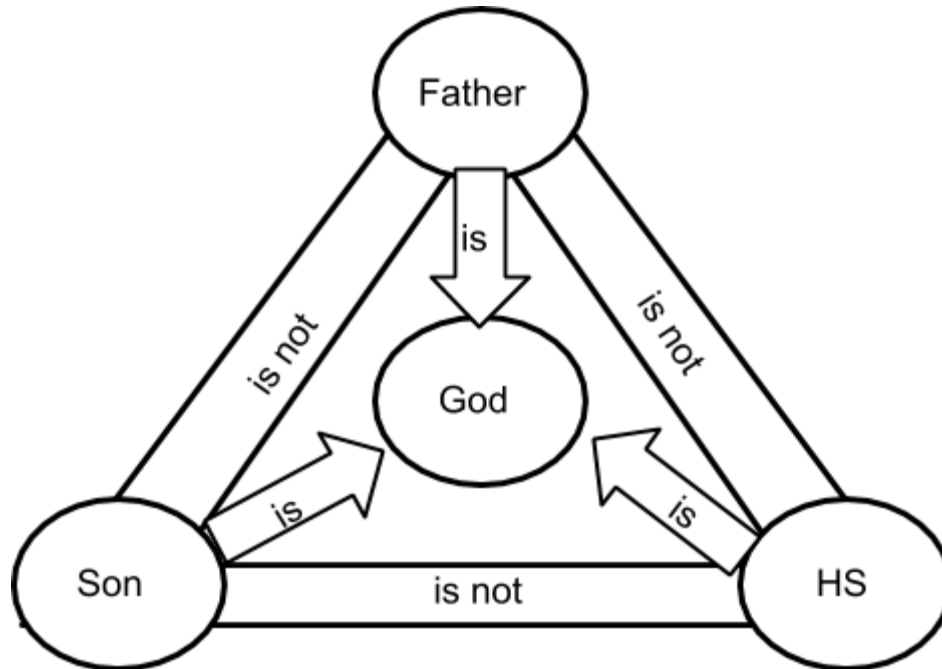
Pointing back to Genesis 1. United and distinct. Is Jesus God? Yes. Is Jesus a distinct person? Yes.

God is one in essence/substance

God is three in persons

Each is a person and yet the fact that they are of one essence means there is no division, confusion or disagreement within their persons. All work together cooperatively and sacrificially.

This graph does a good job explaining these.



## II. What the Trinity is Not

We see what the Trinity is not. And most of the time what you have is people taking these two truths that God is one and three and leaning too far one way and end up denying the other. We'll first look at bad heresies and then bad analogies.

### a. Bad heresies

(heresy = false teaching)

Bad teaching, known as heresies, came up in the early church as they were sweating this out. The Trinity affirms, each member of the Trinity is 100% God. Is God 300% added up? No. He's one God. How does that work? Mystery.

If you remember from last week with the writing of the Bible - is it 100% divine or 100% human? Yes. How does that work? I don't know but that's what the Bible says and we accept it by faith. Not as a contradiction but as a mystery.

People over the last 2,000 years haven't liked this. SO they'll try to explain it a certain way, and it ends up not working. You end up saying something the Bible doesn't say.

### i. The Trinity is not three different modes of God. (Also known as Modalism)

proposed by Sabellius in 220. Rather than God being both one and three persons, God is one and exists in three different forms/modes throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament He takes on the role of God the Father. In the Gospels, He takes the role of God the Son. In Acts onward He takes on the role of God the Spirit. It's like an actor changing costumes behind the curtain before he steps out onto the stage.

Any guesses as to why this is wrong? It denies the three-fold personhood! We'll unpack why that's important here soon.

**ii. The Trinity is not God the Father creating two other persons. (Also known as Subordinism)**

Proposed by Arius in 325 AD. He said the Trinity did not eternally exist, rather, God the Father at a certain point in time created God the Son and God the Son at a certain point in time created God the Spirit.

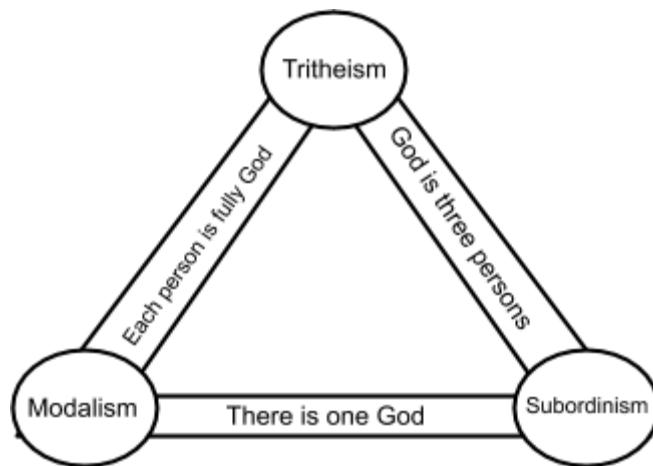
Any guesses as to why this is wrong? It denies their unity!

**iii. The Trinity is not three separate gods. Also known as Tritheism.**

This was also proposed in the early church councils in 325 and 381. Essentially this view said, “Look, you can’t be both three and one. That’s impossible. Look, the Bible we see three obviously. So there’s three gods and they’re all equal in power.”

Any guesses why this is wrong? It denies their unity!

Here’s a helpful graph to help clear things up



**b. Bad Analogies**

Those are the more formal bad arguments of the Trinity, but in normal day-to-day Christian circles we may accidentally slip up into bad theology by using analogies. If someone uses an analogy like this, stop them!

So let’s do a game, with this graph in mind I will give you an analogy and you tell me why it doesn’t work:

i. Three-leaf clover - there are three petals but one clover. Just like there are three persons of God but one God.

Becomes polytheism. Each leaf is only part of the clover, not the whole clover. In the Trinity, each person (clover) is fully God



ii. Water-Ice-Steam - There are three phases of H<sub>2</sub>O -water, steam and ice but it's all one substance. Same as one God but three different forms.

Becomes modalism. Water is never the same form at the same time. In the Trinity, God is always each person.

iii. Someone Who's a Father-Son-Husband - It's one guy but three different roles. Same as one God with three different roles.

Also modalism. One person has three functions. In the Trinity, God is three persons.

You can see when it comes to explaining the Trinity, we're almost at a loss for words for how to describe it and compare it because it's so massive. *[Now this is extra, but I did hear once about a Trinity analogy from a seminary professor that he thinks can work. First you draw a circle. (You can do this on the dry erase board). Now I draw another circle over that circle. Then I draw another circle over top of it. How many circles do I have? Three. If I take away a circle, is it still one circle? Yes.]*

That's a lot of information to process so to break up some of this teaching we're going to watch a short video and then we'll talk about why this is so important for us in a practical way.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>

### III. Why It Matters

#### 1. Without the Trinity, CREATION and SALVATION don't exist

With the Trinity we see all three persons working together in creation. Can someone turn to Genesis 1:1-2 to read for us and while they're turning there can someone go to John 1:1-3. Let's read these both back-to-back:

##### **Genesis 1:1-2 -**

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. **2** 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.

##### **John 1:1-3**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Genesis 1 and John 1 are echoing one another. We see the Trinity creating everything. God's Son (the Word) in John 1 is with God the Father creating things and the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1:2 present as well.

Colossians 1:15-17 picks up on the same idea of Christ being present in creation as well. Can someone turn there and read it?

**Colossians 1:15-17** - (first born does not refer to origin but authority)

**15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. **16** For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. **17** And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians goes a step further than John 1 and says God the Son not only helped create all of creation but that He even sustains all of creation. In other words, the reason why we have universal norms like - gravity and atoms operating the way they do - Colossians tells us it's because God the Son is holding them all together by His power.

Because of the Trinity, we know that God has eternally known what self-giving, perfect love looks like, and thus he can create us out of that love without needing anything in return. He is completely self-sufficient and creates out of the overflow of love within the Trinity!

## Salvation

### Herman Bavinck

In the doctrine of the Trinity beats the heart of of the whole revelation of God for the redemption of humanity.

Turn to Ephesians 1:3-14. And as you're reading make note or underline all the things that the Trinity does in the process of salvation.

### Ephesians 1:3-14

**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

**11** 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.

So what do we see each person in the Trinity doing here?

Father - Chose us (v.4) Predestined, adopted (v.5) lavished wisdom and insight (v.8)

Son - Redemption, forgiveness (v.7), uniting all things in Him (v.10)

Spirit - sealed (v.13), guarantee (v.14)

In the Trinity all persons play a part in saving us. God the Father doesn't die for our sins, God the Son does. God the Son doesn't seal us, that's God the Spirit. And so on. Their parts may be different but all three are unified in their desire and plan to save. The Son isn't the "good guy" convincing a begrudging Father to save us.

## **2. Without the Trinity, LOVE and SERVICE don't exist.**

We see that the Trinity also gives us a framework for how we are to love one another. A popular attribute of God is from 1 John 4:8, 16. It simply says, "God is love." But this God is a Trinitarian God and unless you have the doctrine of the Trinity, you cannot have a God of love. Perhaps you can believe in a god that is loving, but that's different from God is love.

### **CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity***

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that "God is love." But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love... God is not a static thing...but a dynamic life, a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.<sup>10</sup>

So think about it, the god of Islam, the god of Mormonism, any religion that denies the Trinity cannot say their god is a god of love but because God inherent in His nature is three persons, He is able to love before anything or anyone was ever created.

## **Love**

This has massive implications for what it looks like to be a Jesus-centered family on mission. Notice how Jesus uses Trinitarian language to set the bar for our relationships:

### **John 17:20-21**

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Do you see that? Jesus is giving us a theology lesson here by saying, "Do you see this eternal, sacrificial love within the Godhead? THIS is how you as believers are called to love each other." That's pretty intense.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the language the early church used to describe the Trinity - perichoresis. Peri meaning "around" and choreo (where we get the word choreography.) <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/perichoresis/>

Another way that we live out the beauty of the Trinity in community is through reflecting God's unity-in-difference. Though there are clear differences between these ideas, we hear echoes of this when Paul calls us one body with many parts. We reflect our Triune God when we seek to love those in the body who are different than us-- whether in gender, ethnicity, personality or giftings.

### **Service**

Along with this the Trinity informs how we are to view submitting to authority and serving one another. In our culture we immediately assume that if I submit to someone or if someone serves me then that must mean that someone is inferior or superior to someone else. But notice what Jesus - WHO IS FULLY GOD - says:

#### **John 14:28**

You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

#### **Phil 2:5-8**

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

#### **Mark 14:36**

36 And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

How do you explain this?

These verses show that God the Son submits to God the Father and yet, the Bible says that never once does that imply inferiority. Both the Son and the Father are fully God. Completely equal. Which means this - service and submission according to the Trinity does not mean one is less than the other. So think about this when it comes to the church: the pastor preaching on stage and the member working in the production both have different roles, both have different authority and both are completely equal. We won't get into this today, but even when the Bible speaks of marriage it talks about differing roles in the marriage and because of the Trinity, both are fully equal.

(A quick aside, this idea of submission within the Trinity is getting some attention lately in evangelical circles. The big question is, did Jesus always submit to the Father in eternity past or did He submit to Him only during His time on earth? Hmm...<sup>11</sup>)

### **Conclusion:**

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<sup>11</sup> For a deep dive into the economic Trinity, immanent Trinity, and the eternal subordination of the Son, check out this post with links to more reading/perspectives: <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2016/06/the-eternal-subordination-of-t.php>

So while there's a lot of unique distinctions about Christianity compared to other religions the doctrine of the Trinity is the bedrock. Without the Trinity you have no concept for love, you have no concept for relationships but rather you see that God in His timelessness and omnipotence actively and intentionally chose to create the universe, chose you and chose to rescue from your sin before time and space even began. The more we set our attention and affection on this doctrine, the more we see just how big this God is.